

CIRCUMSPECT

2001

Interviews:

D.Dale Lydia Lunch Nick Zedd
Cheryl B.
Shannon Wheeler
Phoebe Gloeckner
Kieron Dwyer
Penelope Houston
Douglas Rushkoff

Issue #1

\$5

Here are 10 differences between corporations and real people: 1. Corporations have perpetual life. 2. Corporations can be in two or more places at the same time. 3. Corporations cannot be jailed. 4. Corporations have no conscience or sense of shame. 5. Corporations have no sense of altruism, nor willingness to adjust their behavior to protect future generations. 6. Corporations pursue a single-minded goal, profit, and are typically lef- gally prohibited from seeking other size. 8. Because of their political power, they are able to define or at very least substantially affect, the civil and criminal regulations that define the boundaries of permissible behavior. Virtually no individual corporation has such abilities. 9. Corporations can combine with each other, into bigger and more powerful entities. 10. Corporations can divide themselves, shedding subsidiaries or affiliates that are controversial, have brought them negative publicity or pose liability threats.



--Russell Mokhiber and Robert Weissman

Welcome to Circumspect!

What you hold in your hands is a fanzine. I like all of the people in here and it was a thrill to talk to them, and I thank all of them for giving up some time to talk to me. All of the interviews were initially intended to only appear on a radio show called "Write On Radio," which airs in the Twin Cities on the community radio station KFAI (<http://www.kfai.org>; 90.3FM, Minneapolis; 106.7FM, St. Paul). However, after I realized that I had a collection of eight interviews with a unique set of people who had important, relevant (especially in light of the 2000 presidential election), and interesting things to say, I thought their words should be available in print and not lost to the airwaves.

I've thought about putting the interviews online somewhere, and that may happen in the future. However, there are a few reasons I haven't done that. One, I don't like staring at computer screens. Two, I like booklets, books, magazines, printed material. It's an artform I appreciate. Three, I wanted to get Kieron Dwyer's "Consumer Whore" image out in independent and comic book stores, because what Starbucks did (and continues to do) to him pisses me off. I wish every magazine in the world would run his image on their covers and collectively tell Starbucks to "F\$#k Off!" once and for all. Maybe Adbusters and the Billboard Liberation Front would like to help out?

I guess there's a fourth reason I'm putting this in print. Thanks to books by people like Henry Rollins (most importantly for me *Get In The Van*) and V. Vale (RE/Search publications) a new world opened up for me that I had no access to while growing up in a suburb of St. Paul, Minnesota. If anyone reading this discovers someone that they didn't know about before who does something that amazes and inspires them, I have succeeded in some small way. Then all the hours spent after—sometimes during—work using the workplace computers and software to put this together, and all the miles I've walked back and forth from temp jobs to the radio station to conduct the interviews during my overextended lunch hours, will have been worth it.

Thank you to the following: Everyone I interviewed. Lynette Reini-Grandell for playing my interviews on her radio show. Venus, who brought up the idea to Lynette about me doing the interviews for the show (<http://www.prettyhorses.net/>). KFAI for letting me use their equipment to conduct the interviews. Jennifer Shinn, who has traded moral support with me for about a year while we try

to do something meaningful with our lives. Friends Pat Yam and Leslie Haack who try to get me to leave my apartment once in a while and have some fun. YOU for reading this.

Now, enjoy the zine while I cross my fingers and hope that Starbucks doesn't decide to sue me.

—Mike Ryan, Editor

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J. Vale

Vale has published books, magazines, and tabloids with underground content for over 20 years. He started his first publication "Search & Destroy" with \$200 given to him by Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg, who he met while working at City Lights Bookstore in the 1970's. S&D documented the San Francisco punk rock scene for the short while it lasted, and then RE/Search publications took form, which continued the investigation into underground culture.

In the eighties RE/Search unearthed the body modification culture with *Modern Primitives*, one of his most successful and well known books, years before piercing and tattooing was something anyone could do at their local strip mall. He's been a step ahead in other areas as well with his books like *Industrial Culture Handbook*, *Incredibly Strange Music*, *Incredibly Strange Films*, and *Swing! The New Retro Renaissance* (it was in the works well before the Gap ad).

Vale also did service to the literary world by releasing out-of-print books by and/or about people like JG Ballard, William Burroughs, Wanda Sacher-Masoch, and Octave Mirbeau, in beautiful formats that make it apparent that he has a passion for books. You can count on RE/Search to deliver after you discover the Oprah books at Barnes and Noble (aka "Buns and Nubile") just don't engage your imagination and intelligence. And that reminds me...

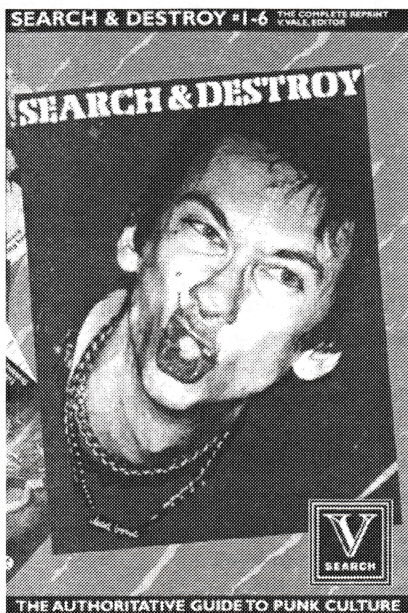
The big box stores like B&N and Borders aren't doing the independent publishing community (e.g. RE/Search, 2.13.61, Gates of Heck) any favors. As Vale notes on the RE/Search website, in 1995 "the big chains began driving what is now estimated as 5,000 small bookstores out of business." That leaves you with corporate stores giving you corporate content as empty as a strip mall in a dying suburb. So, do yourself a favor and search out these publishers, support them directly, and maybe take up the torch yourself and do like Jello Biafra suggests: "Become the Media". Speaking from newfound experience, I highly recommend it.

Vale's latest books are *Real Conversations: Henry Rollins, Jello Biafra, Billy Childish, Lawrence Ferlinghetti* and, due out sometime in 2001, *Modern Pagans*. Go to <http://www.vsearchmedia.com/> to check out and buy all the cool stuff. You can also call (415) 362-1465 and order direct from Vale himself.

Mike Ryan: Tell us about the history of RE/Search publications.

Vale: The history of RE/Search. Well, it may be a disappointment to some people, but I really started out because I was in the original, very original, upsurgings of the punk rock cultural revolution in America. And what got me very angry was a few mass media articles on punk rock reducing it to spitting on people and safety pins. And I knew that this was something that was going to sweep away the moribund excesses of the 60's and basically restore creativity to the populist population.

I look at punk rock as just another manifestation of folk music. And what did folk music always do? It gave the voice of the working class, and the lower class sometimes, and it also could be made by anybody. In fact, back in the days before television and even radio had colonized and sedated the American population, it was most common to make your own music in your own house because a lot of people didn't have a radio in the 20's. Radio didn't even hit the country until close to the mid-30's,



and even then not everyone had a radio. If you wanted to hear music you had to make it yourself. This is not a bad thing!

We're living in the grip of many myths, which I think are absolutely disempowering. And one of the myths is the great myth of Progress. It's like everything's gotten better in every way—I don't think so. Au contraire, I think the world is a better place when you have more people making music, being Sunday painters on weekends, whittling wood sculptures at home in the Tennessee Ozarks, making their own clothes at home or whatever. I think that is far better than going out and buying it or getting it on E-Bay. I think we've transmogrified into an immensely parasitical society thanks to all this so-called "free and easy" and

very titillating bright flashy shiny designerfied mass media that's absolutely addicting. The thing about images on television and advertising is they're actually addicting to people, and they work in many different ways. The most successful way is they present you with a problem that you cannot solve.

"Corporatization wrecks culture in general."

They eat into your back-brain, these problems. Your poor little overloaded neo-cortex is just working overtime trying to solve these enigmas they throw at you, these puzzles, which are of course 'brand-building.'

The average person these days recognizes something like 7,000 brand names. That's way too much garbage--corporate gunk--in your brain. I don't believe the capacity of the human brain is infinite like they keep telling us. No, I think you can only keep so much information in your head at any one given time. Otherwise you start to just go crazy. Basically, the average American is kind of crazy now. They have too much information in their head, which has nothing to do with their personal creativity or mythology. It's all iconography and imagery implanted by corporations and their very clever ad agencies.

There's just no substance anymore. It's just a country full of T.S. Eliot's hollow men—well, I'll say women, too—just walking around. They're a bunch of mannequins walking around. And, yeah they do have their little—they're grasping at straws. They have an identity by listening to, you know, some obscure indie rock band or whatever. Or being a fan of some television show in the 60's, so they can bond with other fans; some obscure little bit of culture. But as far as personal creativity goes, in a way, I think it's never been at such a low as now. Yet you could argue that it's pretty high on the other hand, if you consider making a web-site a creative act. There's something now like 40-60 million web-sites out there, a lot which are made by individual humans. I suppose they're all trying to claim their art.

So, you have a paradox: a huge amount of information overload, very little being said that's very meaningful, in my opinion. You also have the added pressure of the massive ramping up of real estate prices in all the urban centers in America, soon to be the rest of the world. They're just making it a condition that in order to survive you've got to work 40-80 hours a week. You might have noticed, but the 40 hour work-week seems to be a thing of the past, and no one seems to have noticed or cared. They don't have time anymore. But, a lot more people have these shiny new BMW v3's and SUV's, that are completely polluting the atmosphere and making everyone far more aggressive than they ever were driving-wise. Everyone's wearing shiny new Gap clothes, and everyone wants to be a TV star. They want to be on one

of those stupid talk shows. They all kind of look like they could be now. They go to the right hair dressers and buy the right Gap clothes and have this cool-looking gelled hair.

M: *So you'd say your publications fight against all of these problems you are talking about?*

V: Absolutely! The way punk rock started out, it was kind of like the last international huge global cultural movement that there could ever have been. I say it could ever have been because we haven't seen anything the likes of it happen since.

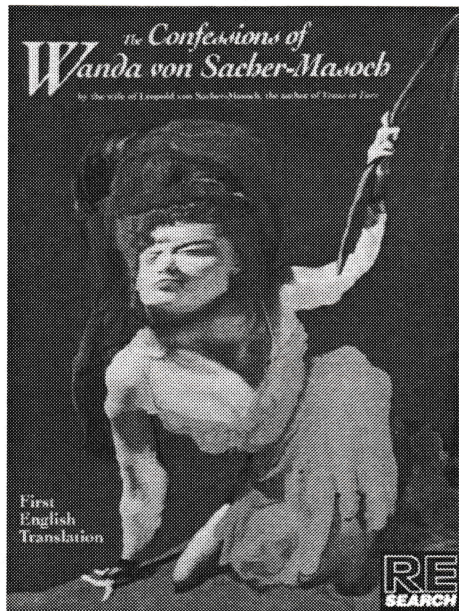
Community means fighting alienation. It means nurturing creativity. It means building a better world, really. That's usually the impetus for any kind of community that forms; in some way that is its goal. Enabling everyone to have a creative role, too, that makes them feel good. Because when people aren't being creative, that's when they start consuming. That's when they start becoming really miserable. So one of the goals of all my publishing has been to demystify the secrets of creativity. Usually it's a lot easier than you think.

I think if you have a society of people who are very creative they'll realize things like there's enough clothes on the planet right now to fit everybody for at least the next 20-30 years. They could stop making clothes right now. There'd be enough in thrift stores for everyone to have plenty. There's just way too much production of junk happening in this country. Consumerism—it's time to put a moratorium on it, of course that'll

never happen. But, if you're doing creative work you'll find that, no, you don't need a huge closet of clothes. You only need a few clothes. You just need some *art supplies*. If you consider web design to be an art form then I suppose you could have your little computer and do that.

M: *And you don't need a Barnes & Noble or Borders bookstore either.*

V: No! You definitely don't need them! They have wrecked the book business with chains and Amazon.com is right there with them. Actually, the whole corporatization of everything wrecks culture. **Corporatization wrecks culture in general.** Because what is a corporation? It's just a stupid principle that's very anti-human and anti-life-on-the-planet, which is simply "do whatever it takes to make maximum profit as fast as possible." So, no, you don't care about hu-



man values or animal values...do you know that every year America dumps 100 billion gallons of urban waste just into the Pacific Ocean alone? And that may be a conservative statistic. Well who's *doing* this? It's not you and me. It's got to be corporations who are just trying to save some money. The number of species, of course, is disappearing about 1 every 10 seconds. Where are our values at?

M: Could you explain a little about what the bigger book chains have done with your books?

V: Oh yeah, like they don't order them! Because the big chains themselves are squeezed for profit, because they have these stock holders. Stock holders and bookstores is a marriage made in Hades for sure. **Knowledge and information and wisdom should not be aligned with making shareholder profits.**

Books are now treated as magazines. You've got just a few months for your books to be in the store. There's almost no backlist presence in any of these stores. But people get full because they go to these big box stores like Barnes & Noble and Borders, and they see a lot of books and they think, "Wow! There's such freedom of choice." But there isn't. Practically all of the books there are corporate from corporate sources. You don't see *my* books there anymore. The eccentric little stores that would order me just because they like my content, have all been *driven out* by the chain stores. That leaves you with the Internet. But again, with 40-60 million websites out there, it's going to be pretty hard to find mine. I don't think the Internet is the salvation for independent cultural producers such as myself.

M: Where do you find your information given that you find corporate bookstores to be unacceptable sources?

V: Well, that's changed a lot, because there were a lot of RE/Search projects I was doing which involved going to bookstores and being on various lists of rare book dealers, things like that. Actually, I now get some of my information on the web; friends forward it to me usually.

It's funny, because in the last year or so I did read a whole bunch of business magazines and Wall Street Journal and New York Times pretty religiously trying to get a handle, like most artists, on this absolute threat—it's like Godzilla. It's sort of like the "Corporate Business 2.0 New-dot-CON Economy Godzilla" vs. the old fashioned artists trying to still live in a city. I do think that in order to produce art it

certainly used to be very helpful to be in an urban setting. Now I'm not so sure. I certainly don't want to produce art in a redneck town, that's for sure.

It's time for a different type of networking that artists have never seen before so that artists can survive. I think we have to have artists getting together to *buy* buildings. Art, historically, has always been dependent on cheap rent. Now we better start learning that we have to buy so we don't get kicked out. Every week in San Francisco, some artist I know gets evicted.

500 musicians shared this one large rehearsal warehouse space that got bought for Dot-CON-ization. They stupidly agreed to accept the payment of \$750,000, a mere \$1500 each. Where are they going to find another rehearsal space for \$500,000? \$500,000 barely gets you a studio apartment in San Francisco anymore. It made big news and it was shocking some people but really, you can't get anything for \$500,000.

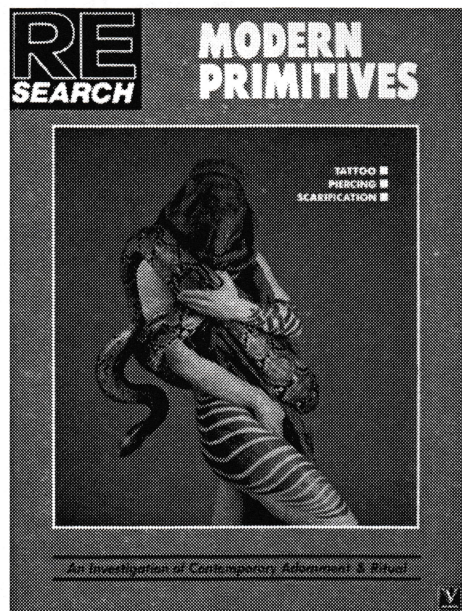
M: So, at this point are you still able to concentrate solely on your publishing or have you been forced to take on other writing work?

V: I have unfortunately had to do some writing for publications such as Wired and Tower Pulse or whoever. But I can't say that I'm very proud of any of those kinds of commercial pieces, because they're so formulaic. And are they going to be remembered in fifty years? I think not.

I always wanted to have all my publications literally still be of inspirational value in fifty years, even if all the mediums have changed. Still, some things don't change... about how you monitor your dreams and how you do random this and that to get inspired. It's not a logical process.

Every artist has their own little bit of advice to give you or story to tell. That's kind of what I like to communicate in my publications. It was really a populist vision of the whole world being nothing but a world of artists doing little things. It doesn't matter whether they're monolithic and huge or on a very small scale. Everyone can do something that has their unique stamp of creativity on it. That's kind of my overarching belief. That's the philosophy behind the publishing.

Books are low-tech and they're cheap and portable, and you can read them in the bathtub unlike a stupid e-book that costs \$600. You can mark them up in the margins. All my books bare the marks of me having a conversation with the author even if the author is dead. I mark them up and put question



marks, you know, and point out when the author was wrong, and site other references from other books that contradict the author at this point. That's part of the fun of reading, but of course do you think anyone does that anymore? No.

M: *They don't have time.*

V: They don't have time and yet there's more people on the planet than ever. You'd think with the number of people on the planet, the amount of "great art" like all the art you see in museums—why there should be a *thousand* times more than there is, but no there's less. Everyone's stupider. Everyone does less. Everyone does drone-like jobs. No one's leaving any legacy behind. They're all just consumers. Consuming videos, consuming CDs, Nike sneakers, whatever they feel they have to keep buying more of that they really don't need.

M: *What is the current project you are working on?*

V: We're doing one that's called *Modern Pagans* trying to demystify that area. Pagan, apparently to a lot of people it conjures up visions of witches kidnapping children and doing voodoo-rites and making people fall and break their legs or whatever they show on TV I'm not familiar with, like Buffy the Vampire Slayer and all that.

M: *Is this related to your Modern Primitives book?*

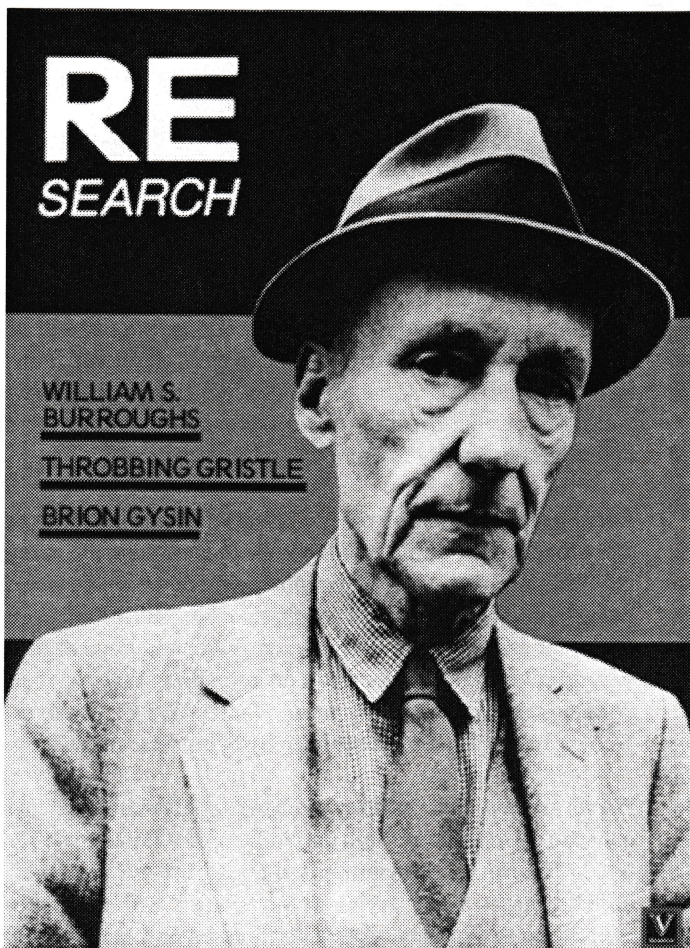
V: Oh yeah, I sort of call it the "spiritual companion," although spiritual may not exactly be the right word, because I don't think there is any difference between the physical and the spiritual. We need our bodies. If our bodies aren't here there's no spirit around that I can communicate with. Spirit and flesh are pretty much inseparable, I think.

But, yeah we're humans. What does it mean to be human? Well, we have bodies that can experience a great deal of pleasure and joy and laugh—we can laugh! We can feel all these pleasures. And yet our society tries to make us into consumers consuming images or whatever. But we're not doing things. **I think you're most happy when you're being creative on some level. Even if it's just having a creative conversation. That is totally a valid form of creativity. Do you think people stay up all night and have great conversations about the meaning of life? I don't think so.** They're too busy working at their dot-coms or their other miserable jobs so they can afford the Gap clothing they've convinced themselves they need.

M: *One of the articles you wrote for Tower Pulse, which was pushed back and later dropped, was a report on the ex-Dead Kennedy's members suing Jello Biafra. Could you talk a little about that?*

V: I think there were some problems with Biafra's defense. There's a problem anytime in a jury trial that if you're a charismatic leader-type you're probably going to lose. It didn't look good for three underlings—and that's exactly what they were. They're not on the level of Biafra's creativity in any level, although they were good musicians. What have they done since then? Well, they've just played in kind of less-than-exceptional bands, apparently, at least from a commercial stand point and possibly from a musical standpoint as well. Yet these three guys persuaded the jury that they all owned the songs together, which I think was wrong. I think Biafra wrote most of those songs. I accept his viewpoint that he did hum them. And I think these three guys helped in arranging the songs. But to give them songwriting credit and ownership I think is wrong. That's one of the key points obscured in this trial.

I remember Biafra actually gave a demonstration at the trial of how you could bring a song to a band and they could figure out the chords behind it. You could sing "Anarchy in the U.K." or "Happy Birthday" or whatever. Any number of simple songs and I would think you would deserve to be the writer. Just because you didn't come up with the bass part and the guitar solo for "Happy Birthday" doesn't mean that you weren't the writer of it.



**"Be very circumspect about where you get
your information."**

M: *Wasn't the defense citing blues players who couldn't read music?*

V: Yeah, but the jury didn't get it. So much of winning a trial has to do with kissing up to the jury, figuring the jury out, rather than the actual legal issues involved. So much of it was psychology, and a jury will almost always vote with three underlings because they themselves are not CEO-types, usually. Usually in a jury you have these people who are used to just working for a living all they're lives; taking orders essentially. They're going to identify with the three band members who really were hired hands in my opinion. They won't like to hear that, but... They hitched their wagon to a star in my opinion.

M: *What kind of repercussions do you see this trial having on other artistic media?*

V: Well, that'll take a while because we're just in the midst of an immense copyright upheaval in general thanks to the web and Napster and all these other ways of doing information transfer without borders or gate-keeping. It's hard to say how critical it will be. But every case like Biafra's is dangerous because it establishes precedence. And of course Biafra is going to appeal it. But nevertheless there's no guarantee that the appeal will be successful.

M: *In your opinion, is there an alternative to the Internet that will help artists establish themselves?*

V: It's completely unproven that any content-model can survive economically on the web. It's just another medium. It's a great medium, by the way, I would never put down the Internet. The Internet, for example, makes it possible for all the pagans to find each other now, and to get a very short-term notice of the next pagan gathering! I mean, the Internet can be great for a certain type of community building. But as far as helping out small-business people, I suppose it could help there, too. Speaking from experience, we get about one order a day on the Internet. Believe me, that's not enough to live off of.

My main quarrel with Amazon.com is that before they were in the equation and existed, in order to get a discount of like 55% a retailer would have to buy 500 books. But now Amazon.com has this situation where, "Well, if you want to be in our 'Advantage Program', these are the terms: 55% discount, you pay the freight." Then you get an order for like 3 copies of a book. That didn't used to exist. That isn't exactly great, because you could argue that it takes almost as much labor to fulfill a 3 book order as it does to fill a 500 book order. That's a slight exaggeration but I think you get the picture.

M: *So, if people want to support independent books and they should patronize the independent bookstores in their city.*

V: Yes! If they've got any of our books left! And, you know, I've got a couple rules for living. A: try to avoid buying anything that comes in a bright shiny over-designed corporate package. And, B: try and buy everything direct from the independent as much as possible. That's the only way independents are going to survive I think. The issue is a little more complex than this, especially now that all the corporates are trying to do things that look and masquerade as independent, especially in the book business. But believe me they're not independent. They're undergoing censorship you never even know happens, because they imitate the form of independent content or they just rip it off.

M: *So that's where a lot of the complexity lies then, trying to determine what the "real thing" is.*

V: Yeah, I don't think there are too many 'real things' left these days anywhere. I would say that's one of the big crises today facing everyone: the question of authenticity. And not only in all the art [but] in your own personal experience. Because we're in such a heavily media-immersive environment, it's hard to tell if you just had an original thought or was it from some ad you just saw. Do notice how homogenized everyone's speech has become. Are there any William Burroughs out there today? Not in the news media that I see. Everyone all sounds the same.

M: *Is there anything else you wanted to add?*

V: Well, yeah! I think that everybody should periodically go on a *media fast*. Just three days of not watching television, not even accessing your computer to go on the Internet, not even reading a book, not reading a magazine, not reading your cereal box package. Just try and go on a 3-day media fast periodically in which you actually do something creative. Write in your journal. Try and do a painting. Maybe try and make a piece of music on your \$50 Casio keyboard. Anything! Just do it yourself and do it. I got this idea from someone else who said, "I discovered I had so much time for myself, I couldn't believe it!"

The second thing is just look at all corporate media's food. Most corporate food is poisoning you so why wouldn't the media do the same? Be very circumspect about where you get your information, and try to do some actual research. And read books! Just turn off all the media and actually read books, and underline them and put question marks in the margins and treat them as a conversation. And that's it! **C**

Kieron Dwyer vs. the man

Kieron Dwyer is a comic book artist who (at the time of the interview, anyway) lives in San Francisco. Most of his comic book career has been spent drawing superheroes for comic book powerhouses like Marvel and DC, but a couple of years ago he decided to put out an underground comic book called *Lowest Comic Denominator* (LCD). It was raunchy, snotty, and irreverent, especially towards Starbucks whose logo Dwyer made a parody of and featured on the cover of the first issue. Well, some Starbucks people got a hold of this comic book and without so much as a cease and desist letter, they sued him. Kieron's battle with Starbucks continues and you can keep up with it and his many other comic and animation projects at <http://www.LCDcomic.com>.

Mike Ryan: *How did you decide on Starbucks in particular for the cover of the first LCD?*

Kieron Dwyer: The image came to me, the words "consumer whore" came to me, not long after a Starbucks opened in my neighborhood about four or five blocks from where I live in San Francisco. There are quite a few of them here in San Francisco now. They've slowly usurped most of the other independent or small local chains of coffee companies. When they first moved into my neighborhood I sort of had mixed feelings about it, because I didn't care for their virus-like spreading across the country. On the other hand, I was semi-addicted to Frappachinos. So, it was kind of a mixed blessing. Not long after they did actually open up, I noticed a really dramatic increase of trash in my neighborhood. Most of it, or a good percentage of it, I found to be Starbucks cups and Starbucks bags, things like that. It's pretty hard to mistake that stuff, because they emblazon their logo on everything they sell. I felt they were representative of some of the worst of consumerist disposable culture. Somewhere in there, the term "consumer whore," struck me as apt. I think in some ways it was a kind of morphing from the other phrase "buy more now," which I used on the t-shirt actually. Underneath the Starbucks parody logo it says in big black letters "BUY MORE NOW," which I felt really summed up the Starbucks mentality, and also the mentality of people who shop at Starbucks, Old Navy, Gap and all these other sort of things that have spread like wildfire.

M: *How long have you been living in San Francisco?*

K: I've been here for ten and a half years now.

M: *So, I'm assuming things were a lot different ten and a half years ago than they are now?*

K: It certainly felt that way when I moved here. I guess largely because of the dot-com boom and the tech-boom being centered in the Bay area, and also largely in San Francisco, the city has clearly been prospering in a lot of ways. But in other ways I feel that it has lost a lot of its—when I moved here it definitely had more of a provincial sort of small town city feel to it. Every other person wasn't walking down the street with a cell phone and a latte in the other hand. Aside from just the cost of living increases here, I feel like a lot of the

heart in the area has been sort of sucked out of it. I found that disturbing, and I found that Starbucks was a good target and a good representative, symbolic icon of that.

M: *Do you think you'll be staying in San Francisco over the next few years?*

K: I don't know that I'll be able to. I'm actually facing an eviction right now where I live. That's become increasingly the case in the city, because of the cost of living and the tech-economy is still fairly robust. It's taken a lot of hits lately, but it's still driving the area, and the rent increases have been so dramatic. Because of rent-control, landlords are essentially encour-

aged to kick out existing tenants, whether they're good tenants or not, to double per month what they're getting in rent. So, I don't really know whether I'll be able to afford living here. Unfortunately, my business is based here now. I've formed this new web animation business, and we're locked into where we're renting our office space for a year. And we've got at least a year obligation on our current project. So, it's going to be an interesting year for me as I try to figure out how I'll stay in the area without going totally bankrupt.



"I would ask that people give it a second thought before they buy products from...companies that definitely don't have people's best interests at heart."

M: *So, it sounds like your problem with places like Starbucks and other corporations is not just ideological. It's having a very tangible effect on you, considering that you are facing eviction.*

K: Yeah, I feel like it really has. I also feel like there's something dovetailing with the feeling I'm having with San Francisco in general as far as having some of its soul being sucked out of it. I feel like that there's a blanket movement that is being driven by greed. I feel that pertains to the Starbucks case as well. Despite any protestations that they might make to the contrary, I think that what they did in suing me was a very cynical and sinister kind of act. It was much more extreme than was required as a reaction to what I was doing, and to the level of what I was doing. I was not a rival coffee chain with large coffers to back up my defense. I was clearly just an individual doing small time business on the web and through mail order. Anyone who looks at my website (www.LCDcomic.com) can see that it's not a commerce-based site. It's a humor-based site that happens to sell a few t-shirts and stickers. The action that they took shows what is already a clear pattern of greedy behavior on their part. I don't feel like what they did was just simply a defense of their trademark. I understand that companies, to some extent, have to mount regular defenses of their trademarks in order not to have those trademarks weakened, but they didn't even make the effort to send a cease and desist letter or resolve this in a non-litigious way. They went directly to filing a very large suit. And when you look at a corporation suing an individual, as far as I'm concerned that's a very cynical act. A corporation in a legal sense actually has as many rights, and thereby kind of more rights than an actual human individual.

M: *What had you been doing before you started creating the LCD comic?*

I pretty much bounced around from project to project and did limited series things, one-shot specials things like that until a few years ago—about 1997—I started self-publishing a mini-comic version of LCD which was my own comic project. It's done pretty well considering it's a pretty small grassroots-type project. I think it's done well in part because many people know my work from mainstream comic stuff that I did. Those people always seemed greatly amused by the fact that the comic I chose to do for myself is completely unlike anything I ever did in the mainstream. It doesn't involve superheroes at all. It's purely a low-brow, adult humor comic in the spirit of Mad magazine back in its heyday or National Lampoon during the 70's, some of R. Crumb's

work or Ivan Brunetti's work. It's sort of that vein of underground adult humor.

M: *I'm not familiar with Ivan Brunetti. What did he do?*

K: He does a book called "Schizo" which is published by Fanographics. It's a very dark dark humor that he does. It's like some of R. Crumb's darkest stuff to the nth degree. Ivan is a brilliant artist. He's amazingly adept at different styles of art. Unfortunately, he's also completely self-deprecating and self-loathing. His comics are almost exclusively based on his own self-hatred, whereas my comics have none of that pesky self-loathing. I direct all my loathing outward.

M: *Do you have any final comments concerning Starbucks?*

K: I would ask that people give it a second thought before they buy products from Starbucks and in general before they buy products from companies that definitely don't have people's best interests at heart. I have nothing against capitalism per se. I don't have anything against making money. I'd like to make some money myself someday, but I do have a problem with companies of the size and nature of Starbucks, Coca-Cola, McDonalds or any of these kind of multi-national megacorporations who basically depend on the wholesome images they portray in their advertising. They pull people in with that, and they depend on the business that they generate because of that. When it comes down to their actual policies or practices they're more likely to be bullies the way that I think Starbucks has been in this case than to be a friend to man. I don't say to people "Don't patronize those things." I'd just like to feel that maybe people will hesitate before they do it. By hesitating maybe they'll think better of it or maybe they'll put themselves in my shoes, what it feels basically to be a little guy getting picked on by a big guy purely for exercising my freedom of expression. That's the kind of thing that could happen to anyone depending on their likelihood or their inclinations towards self-expression. So, like I said, maybe think before you drink. **C**

bad day, part I



To see part 2, go to LCDcomic.com



Shannon Wheeler, Too Much Coffee Man, Surrealism, Politics, and Prison.

Shannon Wheeler is a comic book artist and creator of the comic book *Too Much Coffee Man*. I stumbled upon TMCM one day when I was browsing through Dreamhaven, a comic book store in Minneapolis that provides one of the very few outlets for independent publishing in the Twin Cities area. If I remember correctly, at the time I found Wheeler's gem I was in a rather down mood, which changed quickly within reading the first few pages. The lovable TMCM can be totally weird and screwed up and he makes me laugh out loud a lot, which is quite a big accomplishment. How many things actually make you laugh out loud? Anyway, Shannon Wheeler is still working on his cartoon character but he's turning his comic book into a magazine. He's also working on an animated se-

ries, he sells lots of crap with TMCM stuff on it at his new and improved www.tmcm.com website, and he has political itches he likes to scratch.

Mike Ryan: *Who is Too Much Coffee Man?*

Shannon Wheeler: Ohhh...he's a fictional character—a lot of times people have said, “Well, there's no such thing as Too Much Coffee Man,” and my smart-ass remark is to say that he's a fictional character. He's a fictional character and I actually made him up about 8 or 9 years ago when I was sitting in a coffee shop and I wanted to make fun of the people around me. It was a social parody kind of thing, and I started it as a one-off, just as a single joke. I really thought that it wouldn't go any further than that. I was living in Austin, Texas. I'd done a strip for my college paper in Berkeley, California. Then I graduated from there, moved to Texas, and I started cartooning for the Daily Texan. I started hanging out with a lot of people that were involved with comic books, and they were trying to get me to do comics, “Oh, do comics do comics. They're much better than comic strips.” So, I started doing both, and I started with these 8-page stories that I would collect into photocopied mini-comics. It took me about two years of doing these mini-comics before I finally put together a full comic book. It was good. It gave me a good fan base to draw on.

M: *If you hadn't done comic books do you think there was another direction you would have taken?*

S: [pause, laughter] Hmm...You know, originally I wanted to be a fine artist. I wanted to be a painter or a printer, some kind of fine art thing, but the thing that really bothered me about fine art was mainly that there's not that much of an audience for it anymore. That, and generally the messages in fine art are very abstract. You're dealing with this emotional landscape. I really liked the idea of sitting around and creating these ideas all day long. So, you know, I could've been a frustrated artist. Wind up as an art director, working

at Kinko's or something like that. [laughs]

M: *Did you ever consider just writing without the drawing part involved in comics?*

S: I did. I've toyed with that a few times. I've had other people draw some of my stuff, but it was just frustrating a lot of the times. You would have a very specific idea, and it wouldn't work unless you have a very good relationship with the artist. It becomes this back and forth thing where I'm backseat driving too much. I guess I'm too much of a control freak.

M: *Is there anything you can put your finger on about drawing that really “does it” for you?*

S: Drawing is just incredibly relaxing once you solve all the problems. You get into your drawing groove. It's really another universe where this two dimensional surface becomes three dimensional, and all you're doing is filling in the gaps to kind of represent this thing that's in your head. I really like it when it's working for me. When it's not working it's just as extreme but in the opposite direction. It's just miserable. You're banging your head against the table.

M: *Well, I've noticed there's been a progressive improvement in Too Much Coffee Man. Have you just become a better drawer or have you taken more time with the comics?*

S: A little bit of both. Part of it too is paranoia because I know that people are reading it and looking at it. So, I know that I have an audience now. Whereas when I was starting I was really trying to get an audience. Once you know that

people are going to be looking at your stuff, then you just have to put more work into it. And it's inevitable, too—you sit and do anything and you'll get better at it.

M: *Is there still a strong comic book community?*

S: Yes.

M: *What do you think it is that's kept that going as opposed to things like the late 70's punk rock community? What is it about the comic book world that has given it staying power?*

S: Yeah. That's an interesting analogy. Punk rock definitely had an ideological thing that it was trying to accomplish. So, it was really easy to have an insider/outsider thing happen with it. So, you know, "I'm more 'punk' than you are." "I was a 'punk' before you were a 'punk'." You know, what is punk? What isn't punk? It lends itself to this kind of in-fighting a little bit more than comics do where you draw a comic and it's pretty obvious that there's no arguing that it's a comic. The only thing that happens is that some people get snobby about comics. **There's definitely a faction in the comic book industry that wants to raise comics into an art form, which I completely agree with in theory. I believe that comics are an art form, but I like that it's art-work for the people.** That really appeals to me, that it is so unpretentious. So, I guess yeah, punk rock had a sort of pretentiousness to it even though it was supposed to be fighting pretentiousness. That kind of helped it be self-destructive. Punk rock, too, it's a difficult lifestyle. It takes a lot of energy. Where comic books are not so much of a lifestyle. You can live any way you want to. You could be a right-winger if you chose to and still be a comic book artist. Although, I don't think I even know any Republicans. But theoretically it's possible.

M: *The other thing I was thinking too with drawing comic books is that you basically need a pen or pencil and some paper. You don't need huge Marshall stacks or drum kits to make it happen, which is sort of why writing can be appealing. It's really cheap. Do you live in Portland now?*

S: Yeah, moved up with my wife, partner—we haven't figured out a term for it. For all intents and purposes we're married. She says that if we were married I'd be her husband. [laughter]

M: *Is she an artist too?*

S: No. She's studying graphic design, but she makes it very clear that she's not an artist.

M: *Is there a pretty good comic book community in Portland?*

S: It's phenomenal. It was one of the big reasons to move up here. Dark Horse Comics, I guess they're about number three on the totem pole of Marvel, D.C., and then Dark Horse. They go through these periods of hiring and firing people and so they'll hire a bunch of comic book artists who will move here and then a year or two later they'll fire a bunch. Slowly, more and more comic

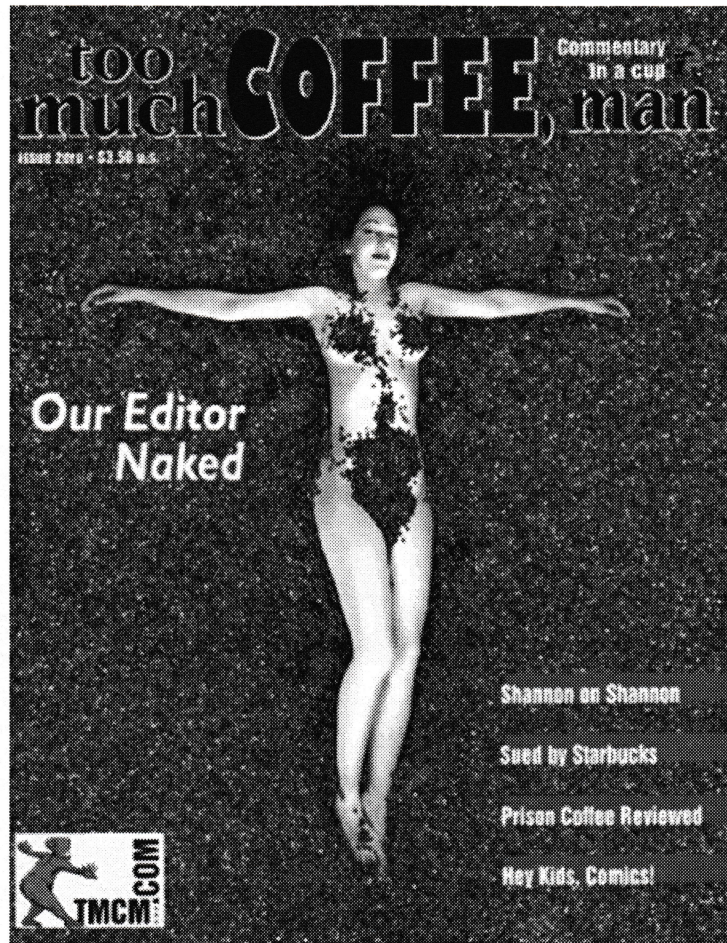
book artists just moved up to Portland and stayed.

M: *Is there a pretty good climate there for artists in terms of low rents and things like that?*

S: I think so. I moved to Austin in part because of the cheap rent and as I was leaving rents just skyrocketed. So, relative to Austin...I move up here and wow, this is just cheap, cheap rent. But people up here—wherever you move people are always going to say how much better it was before you came, "Five years ago, that's when it was really cheap." But yeah, I think so. I see a lot of people in their 20's and 30's who have slacker jobs. They work in a cafe or a restaurant or something part time. They're living their lives fine. But, like in the Bay Area, you'd have to hustle. You'd have to work 60 hours a week—you'd have to work a lot just to make a living. Up here you can still—there's still a lot of niches you can find.

M: *Are there still a lot of independent bookstores around?*

S: Oh, tons. The bookstore and cafe scene here is incredible.



M: So, it's not just Starbucks and Barnes & Noble in Portland then.

S: [laughs] No, it's really a lot of mom-and-pop coffee shops and mom-and-pop bookstores sprinkled throughout the town. Then there's Pal's Books which is just two or three blocks of bookstore. In the same little area there's two or three other enormous bookstores that are filled with great used books.

M: So, you have a new Too Much Coffee Man magazine out now?

S: Yeah, basically I'm going to turn my comic book into a magazine. You know the dramatic thing for me is, "The last Too Much Coffee Man comic book EVER!" But really all I'm going to do is put articles and interviews in there as well as my comics, sell some advertising to help fund it, and try to go through some mainstream distributors.

M: Who distributes your comic books right now?

S: There is a company called Diamond Distributors, that distributes comic books, t-shirts and other stuff. They are plugged in to the direct market, not just all the comic book stores.

M: What are some of the features of this magazine going to be?

S: I'm trying to figure out ways to scratch my political itches. I kind of man-handle that into having some sort of vague coffee connection while trying to make it funny as well. The prison industry really fascinates me. We just have this prison industry explosion. So how can I get that commentary into my magazine? I had a guy that I've corresponded with who's in prison review prison coffee. There's this stuff called Keefe that comes in a can that's brown. You mix this brown liquid with hot water and that's their coffee. He said it's just the worst tasting stuff he's ever had. He said even the junkies are above drinking this coffee. Then he talks a little bit, too, about how the food system is owned by the same people that own the prisons, and so it's a very corrupt way for them to make more money. If you want to buy anything above and beyond the low-end stuff it's very very expensive.

We're going to do more on prisons. That's something that I don't feel has been talked about enough in our culture, and it's interesting to me. **We want to figure out different ways to talk about aspects of the prison system; who owns them, how the prison population is just exploding and over-flowing, and all these non-violent drug offenders that are locked away for ten years.**

M: So, the first magazine will be the "prison issue"?

S: I just want to do a little feature each month that I'm going to drive into the ground. [laughs] Another friend got sued by Starbucks. He wrote a long article on that, and he'll be writing a follow-up in the next magazine as well. That's really interesting because it's big guy vs. little guy. It's free speech.

M: Basically what's the story behind all of this?

S: In brief, a guy named Kieron Dwyer, who drew Batman, Captain America—he's drawn mainstream comic book heroes for years. Then he started doing this underground comic book called LCD (Lowest Comic Denominator), which is just dirty and foul and offensive. It's like old undergrounds. It's like Robert Crumb kind of stuff. And one of the things he did was make fun of



Starbucks. He took their logo and changed it from saying "Starbucks Coffee" to saying "Consumer Whore" and gave the little mermaid a belly button ring and a cell phone.

He changed the logo and did a parody of it to make fun of consumer culture, and they sued him and said you can't use our logo even as parody or whatever. You'd have to read the article to get all the details of what's happening with it. But it's interesting what they were telling him he could not do with it, what legally he could do and he could not do. It was more than a cease and desist that's for sure.

M: And so, in his article he elaborates on that?

S: Yeah, it's great. It's really interesting, **just the details of**

the representative from Starbucks, this woman in a green suit. And he said it was the same color...you know, he was sitting there in the courtroom wondering, did they make her wear this green suit? Is it coincidence? Do they all where green suits? Just the machinery of litigation I think is really interesting because anytime you begin to do anything, the first thing that people do in our culture is they worry about getting sued. Kieron is the only person I know that's actually been taken to court because he made fun of a large company. In a way, it's very cathartic to read it because you're like, "Oh, OK it's not that bad." You just go in there, stare at the woman in the green suit, get a lawyer, complain about it, write an article.

M: Where will people be able to find this magazine?

S: I'm hoping to get into places like Tower Records and any sort of bookstore that has a coffee shop adjunct to it. I'm gonna be going through the mainstream magazine distributors as well as the comic book people. I just hope I'm not too much of a small fry and get muscled out. I'm gonna really push with getting into—and ask for it! That's the other thing. The power of the consumer is incredible. If you don't see it and you know it's coming out get the manager and say, "Hey, I want this." That makes a really big difference.

M: Where do you do most of your creative work? I'm assuming it's NOT at coffee shops.

S: [laughs] No, I do a lot of work in coffee shops.

M: Do you really?

S: Yeah, it's a cliché. It's a terrible cliché, but yeah, it's a great place to work. I go in there and I sit down and start pondering. Pondering life. A lot of times I'll take walks and let ideas come that way. The actual drawing, I need to be at home in my little drawing studio with my CDs and special light and special pens and that whole thing. But just for the writing and thinking, it's really good for me to get out into reality.

M: What sort of creative process do you use when you make your comics?

S: It varies a lot. Sometimes it'll come to me like "here's a whole storyline." Usually, the stupid jokes come to me complete. But a lot of times I'll have an idea and I'll try to work backwards from some notion. Or sometimes I'll have a set-up and then I'll work on it until I can think of some punch-line.



The cartoon that I just finished, I started about three years ago. I thought it'd be really funny where Too Much Coffee Man wakes up and he doesn't have his body. He lost his body. He's dragging himself around the house with his tongue looking for his body. I just thought it was a really neat image. Then my job was to figure out, where do I take that? And I just didn't have any punch-line for it. He goes around and realizes that his body is just where he left it. It was under his neck, and he just didn't realize it. And like, OK, that's an interesting way to find the body. But what does it mean? Other than it being just imagery, where does it go from there? I was replaying the cartoon in my head as I was going to sleep, then it hit me: Oh, OK, he lost his body, now he needs to find the other things that

he's lost. I thought, well, he's lost his motivation or he's lost his will to create things or he's lost his receding hair line. He's lost his career. He's lost his bank account. You know, then it made sense. That way it works structurally as a cartoon, because it moves it back into this thing that's very universal. You first do this thing that creates this image of him losing his body which is impossible, of course. Then connect it to this thing that everybody at one point or another has lost. But yeah, I guess it took me three years to write that cartoon. [laughs]

M: What you just described sounds a lot like surrealism.

S: Yeah...well it was Duchamp as an artist that I really admired. In high school and the first part of college, I felt like there's a guy that approached art in a way that I really liked. It was very much commentary—he rollerskates through the

"You're not going to do your best work until you're 40 anyway. So why worry about it?"

Louvre. You know he *rollerskates* through so he's the person who goes through as fast as possible. That is a little piece of art I really appreciated, because it's commentary commenting on how people look at art, and I thought it was funny. I guess, the artists that I really like are the ones that take art very, very seriously but at the same time have a real sense of humor about it. Edward Gorey does this incredibly macabre stuff, very dark. It's *almost* tongue-in-cheek. He's kind of self-mocking. He seems to just enjoy it a lot. It's not serious, but he definitely treats the art form seriously. Murray Sendak. Kyle Baker I really like now a lot.

M: Who are some people among your peers in the comic book world that you really appreciate?

S: Kyle Baker is almost a peer. The cartoonists I really like? Keith Knight does a cartoon called *The K-Chronicles* and I like his commentary on urban living a lot. He deals with race relations and economics. It's social commentary and I really appreciate his work. Peter Cooper does a lot of great stuff. He was doing a comic called *Eye of the Beholder*. Whatever he does, it's usually pretty interesting. Joe Sacco does a lot of newspaper work and he does comic books that are like articles. He goes to the middle east and writes a lot about what's happening there. I guess the stuff that I really like is the social commentary stuff.

M: How did you hook up with Henry Rollins to illustrate his *Black Coffee Blues* book?

S: I got an e-mail asking if I do book covers or would I be interested in illustrating a book? I wrote him back and said I do that sort of thing and I'd be interested. He e-mailed me his phone number and signed it "Henry Rollins." And I didn't know if it was the Henry Rollins that I knew of or not. When I called up I talked to him briefly. So, "Are you *the* Henry Rollins?" And he said, "Well, there's not many of us with that name." Well yeah, I guess that's Henry Rollins. He'd seen my cartoon in a magazine called *The Workman* and liked it and liked the style and just contacted me out of the blue.

M: Have you been doing other illustrations for other books?

S: I've done a couple others. Nothing very notable. A lot of times in coffee history books they want me to do something. [laughs] I have my niche. I illustrated a book called *Jobs That Don't Suck*, which actually was for Harper-Collins. How to deal with job interviews, things like that. At first I was really dreading it, because I thought I was going to be a terrible sell-out for doing this book. Then I got the manuscript and said, "Wow this is really well written," and thought, "Good, I'm not selling out yet."

M: At this point you're able to make a living just doing your comic stuff then?

S: Yeah, knock on wood. I do that and I do newspaper illustrations. I do various free-lance stuff. And then there's some Hollywood stuff that happens and that's a good little bump of money.

M: There was at one time talk about a *Too Much Coffee Man* cartoon series.

S: They're still working on it.

M: Oh yeah, that was one of the episodes in "*Too Much Coffee Man*"! That's where I got that.

S: Just recently, I guess in August 2000, Comedy Central optioned from an animation company. They want a pilot script, so we just finished that and I guess we're sending it off this week. But there's still, you know...we're on step 2 of 12. There's infinite number of chances to screw it up. But so far I like it. Everybody seems pretty happy with it and excited. It's just incredibly slow moving.

M: So, the next thing we can expect from you is the *Too Much Coffee Man* magazine?

S: Yeah, that I'm going to put out in June of 2001. That is something where I've been really lucky with hooking up with a community here in town. Just the people. They're old Dark Horse employees basically, but I've hooked up with some really bright people. Like the woman who's the editor. She's just great. And the guy who's doing the layout stuff is just amazing. It's just really nice to work with people who are competent.

M: What's your advice to any independent artist out there who wants to make a living at what they're doing?

S: Well, for making a living...I just put as many irons in the fire as I possibly could. I was doing newspaper strips, comic books, and single panel stuff for magazines. I see all that stuff to be the same. I would say, jump in and do it. I know a lot of people that have just planned and they just keep planning. They keep thinking, "I'm gonna do this thing that's the best ever." They just plan and plan and plan and don't actually do anything. I think, ultimately, it's better to do stuff and have it suck and then just do it again and have it be a little bit better. You slowly improve rather than trying to do your best work. You're not going to do your best work until you're 40 anyway, so why worry about it? **C**

Cheryl B.



Cheryl B. is a young, sexy, New York girl, a writer, a poet, a playwright, a graduate student, a working girl, and a creative survivor. In the summer of 2000 she banded together with two other writers, Lauren Sanders and Elena Georgiou, and embarked on a U.S. tour to promote their books. Lauren was promoting her first novel *Kamikaze Lust*, Elena was promoting her book of poems *mercy mercy me*, and Cheryl was promoting her chapbook *New York Girl*, which is a mixture of poetry and prose with a focus on interpersonal relationships and a search for identity framed in words with edge. The trio of women shot across the country getting the word out about their work while trying to hit unconventional venues for spoken word acts like bars, sex shops, and rock clubs.

Cheryl and her posse hit Minneapolis over a sultry 4th of July weekend in the summer of 2000 and graced the 400 Bar with their presence. They glittered up, hit the stage, stroked and rattled the audience's psyche and then shoved off to the West.

Check out Cheryl's recently updated website at www.motoroilqueen.com to read about the legend of the Motor Oil Queen and keep up on her latest activities.

Mike Ryan: *What is Jezebel 2000 and why did you take part in it?*

Cheryl B: "Jezebel 2000 the Glam-Lit Tour" was a 16 city U.S.-Canadian tour that consisted of Lauren Sanders, Elena Georgiou, and myself. Basically, we all had books coming out on independent publishers and we decided to take the bull by the horns and go out and do our own little tour for them.

M: *You were trying to promote independent bookstores as well. I was just wondering if there were any highlights from your tour that you would recommend.*

C: Personally, I liked the cities that I'd never been to before like Montreal, Chicago. New Orleans and Minneapolis. I liked seeing places I'd never been to and going there with a purpose. It was really kind of great. We got a really warm welcome every where we went and people were happy to meet us and we were happy to meet everyone. It was a really positive experience.

M: *Is this going to be a recurring thing?*

C: Well, we're doing some shows here in New York and we're hoping to do some college gigs, but basically I think a tour of that size really took a lot out of us. And I think it's going to be awhile before we can do anything like that again.

M: *A group of writers calling themselves The Wasted Motel Tour came through Minneapolis recently. Do you find a lot more writers are getting together and touring?*

C: Those girls have been part of Sister Spit actually and they've been doing it for years. And we got a little bit of our inspiration from them. They're coming to New York as well, I'm very excited to see them. I think for a lot of us that do work on independent presses we have to kind of promote ourselves, obviously, because the presses don't have any money to put us out there. I think over the years we've gotten used to doing that. There are a lot of little factions coming out and doing their own thing, which I think is great.

M: *When did you first publish a chapbook?*

C: My first chapbook was called *Pubic Enemy Number 1* [laughs] and that was six years ago.

digital cut-up: M. Ryan

con-
called a
stantly

I've been called
Fat, witch
Gross, bitch
Beached whale
Elephant, spoiled brat
Fat girl, good god damn
Fat son of a bitch
Fat bitch
Fat jerk,
Fat fuck,
Fat idiot,
Fat thing,
Fat ass
Fat stupid ass,
Fat fart,
Fat wimp,
Fat loser
Blubber belly,
Hit upside the head,
Spat upon,
Laughed at
A burden
A cunt,
A nag
I've been called
A Jersey girl,
A pothead,
A coed,
A weirdo,
An enigma,
Quiet
Depressed,
Special
Sullen
An Itawaway
The girl
cent skin
Incompe
tent
bimbo
A poser
I've been depressed
A fat hag
Anti-social
A man hater
A downer
A box filth
A defusion
A drunkard
And as I wonder
A sexual dynamo
A shifty bisexual,
A bitter chick full of personal diatribes

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the
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of
not
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ing
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call
my-
self

Someone stepped on my head
I've felt the elec-
tricity of standing
before 2,000 people
And the shock of a
lover's hand
whipping across my
face.
I've been wanted,
Rejected,
Hot,
Cold,
Elated,
And devas-
tated,
Sometimes all in the
same day.
I've sat in the corner
Of a Howard Johnsons
motel room
in Middletown,
New Jersey
And in the
backroom at Roxy
As friends performed
tasks that would alter their respective
lives.
I've walked down Houston Street in
a mask of teflon,
A wonderland of shrooms
And with the Beatles gently synthesize
the maze of ecstasy
I've had female suitors
Male suitors
And the best kitty in the world
I keep my feet warm at night
I've seen brilliant friend
mopping up floors, wiping th
mouths of trust fund babies, an
riches such goddam coke, al
wondering: "When is it my turn t
When is my life going t
I hold the mirror up to my
I could loo
right up into my
brain pumping out ideas and ideas

someone stepped on my head
I've felt the electricity of standing before 2,000 people
And the shock of a lover's hand whipping across my face.

I've been
wanted,
Rejected,
Hot,
Cold,
Elated,
And devas-
tated,
Sometimes
all in the
same day.

I've sat in the corner Of a Howard Johnsons motel room in Middletown, New Jersey And in the backroom at Roxy As friends performed active tasks that

ale suitors,
ale suitors,
the world to
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diant friends
wiping the
babies, and
am coke, all
t my turn to
ife going to
or up to my
I could look
and into my
d and ideas,

C: Well, basically I'd been doing readings and noticed that a lot of people had chapbooks that they would often sell. Also, people would often ask me where they could find my work. So, I decided to put together a little chapbook just to sell at readings. I didn't feel like I was ready yet to have an actual book out so I did that. That's how I met the girl who published my second chapbook, *Ripe*. I brought it to Kinko's to get it reproduced and she put it through the machine. She read it and liked it, and she decided she wanted to publish my second one. That's how I got my second chapbook published. It just kind of went from there.

C: *New York Girl* came out in June 2000. I did that just to go on tour with. It's a little more prose than poetry. I'm very pleased with it. I've got some really good feedback on it. It looks really nice. Vanishing Point Press who did the book for me did a really good job.

C: Actually, I've done a lot of plays as well. I majored in play-writing as an undergraduate. I haven't done a play in awhile. I've been away from theater for awhile. I'm doing kind of my own performance, but I'm working on getting a collection of prose published, like in a book that isn't held together by staples. [laughs] So, I'm kind of working towards getting the actual book out. I'm also working on some essays.

C: I've also just started graduate school so I take classes two nights a week. And basically I've been trying to go to bed early and get up around 6, maybe work for two hours, and then go to work. Whenever I can sneak some time at work I do work here. They're pretty lenient. They're actually pretty great. They let me do whatever I need to here. I try to fit in the time when I can. When I'm inspired to I always find the time whenever I want to write something. That's really never been a problem for me since I've had to work all through what I've done. You learn to work around it.

C: Well, I have a rent stabilized apartment, which I'm very lucky to have. I moved to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, which is like the hot spot right now. I moved there four years ago, right before it got really big. I was able to snag a pretty decent rent there. I've been living here for like 11 years now

and I'm just so used to kind of working my way around, living on a budget. You need to have a day job. You can't really be an artist in New York without a day job, or probably anywhere in the United States it's pretty hard, but especially here because the rents are horrendous and everything else is so expensive.

M: *What have you been reading lately?*

C: Well, for one of my classes I'm reading a Norman Mailer book called *The Deer Park*, which is fabulous. I also read *The Sound and the Fury*, by Faulkner. I read the Jane Bowles collected works, which is wonderful and I can't believe I've never read her before. I actually don't read much poetry, which people find surprising since I write poetry. I have a hard time writing it, which is why I think I like hearing it more. It's more of a form that is to be heard than to be read. I think that's all I've read recently.

M: *What are you studying in grad school?*

C: I'm getting a masters in non-fiction writing. That's why I'm doing essays.

M: *Do you find school helpful as far as learning how to write better?*

C: I think it's giving me structure. It's helping me to veer away from writing directly for performance. That's what I've been doing for so long. It's not that I want to get away from performance all together. It's more like I want to be able to concentrate on things that are a little more...longer, just different, that work better on the page and not necessarily just writing for something that's going to be presented in public. And it is kind of a different mindset that you're working with when you're writing one or the other.

M: *Who are some independent local performers in your area who you think deserve some recognition that people outside of New York and that poetry scene probably wouldn't know about?*

C: Douglas Martin, who goes to school with me, is one of my favorite writers. He writes novels and fiction. He started off in performance poetry as well. Regi Cabico, who is a Philipino poet, who has become a big impresario here in New York. He runs a lot of poetry series. He does a lot for a lot of other people. And his work is really great. And Lauren and Ellen, of course.

M: *Where could people go to find out about the first couple of people you mentioned, Douglas and Regi?*

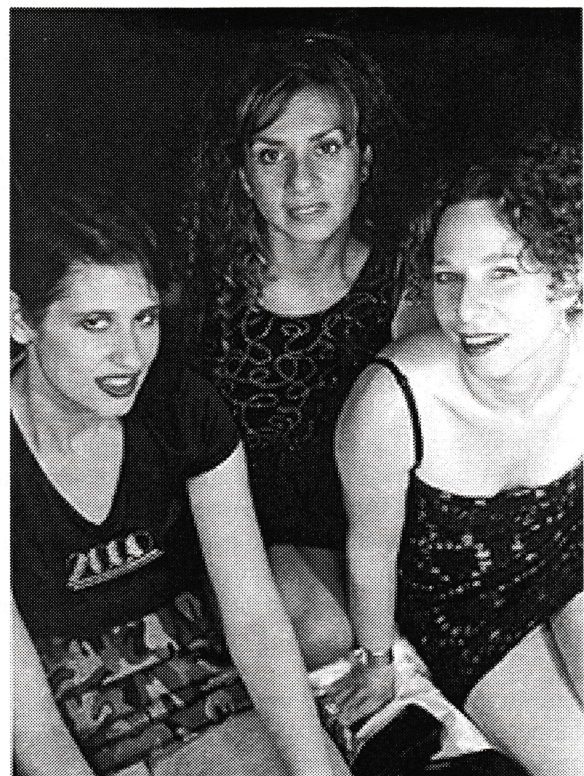
C: I have an interview with Douglas on my website, www.motoroilqueen.com, archived under Literary Instigation. It's a monthly column I do where I interview a different underground writer each month. This month (November,

2000) I have Tim Wells, who's actually from London who does a poetry quarterly called *Rising*. He features poets from all over the world.

Regi does not have a website, he should have one. We keep trying to talk him in to getting one. I can't think of anyone else right now [laughs]. But there's a lot of really great people doing performance poetry and doing readings here in New York right now. If you ever come here, you can pick up a Poetry Calendar to see on any given day a lot of really good stuff.

M: *Given the glut of information that we're faced with every day, what sources of information do you go to to get the information that you really want?*

C: I listen to the radio a lot. I try to avoid television. I'm kind of a geek so I also listen to NPR [laughs]. I don't read newspapers that much. But I do read a lot of news on the Internet, though, I have to admit. It's easier and I'm on the computer all day at work. So, it's easy for me to access that. I do try to keep abreast of what's going on as far as like right now with the elections and all. It's been interesting to watch that, kind of fascinating to watch the debates and all the coverage. It's ridiculous in a way, kind of a big circus. But mostly it's the radio. It's good that there's radio stations out there. **C**



From L to R: Cheryl B., Elena Georgiou, and Lauren Sanders



Lydia Lunch

I don't remember how I first heard of Lydia Lunch, but the first recording I heard of hers was a spoken word CD of a live performance given by herself and Exene Cervenka called *Rude Heiroglyphics*. One of my favorite Lunch lines from that record is "Would somebody please tell the U.S. government that my uterus is not open to public debate." I really appreciate a witty anti-authoritarian existentialist statement like that, which is quite an eye-opening way to deliver a radical pro-choice side of the abortion issue that says, "There is no issue."

Lunch's last novel *Paradoxia* was another eye-opener. It is her sexual autobiography, in a sense, but it is also a document of an underground lifestyle that may no longer be possible. The story told in *Paradoxia* is as much of a modern day adventure as one can have without joining the armed forces at the outset of war, even though she was fighting battles just to stay alive and find solitude throughout her story. Also, *Paradoxia* stands as an anti-establishment work that shows the possibility—though difficult and har-

rowing—of creating a life without going through standard, legal, government-approved molds that would have you believe school-career-marriage-family is the only way to go. The word "alternative" comes to mind.

When I talked to Lunch in early 2001 she was working on co-writing a novel called *Johnny Behind the Deuce*, making a record with Nels Cline called *Torcher*, and setting up a tour. Right before I talked to her she had just returned from a spoken word tour in Europe while the 2000 post-presidential election fiasco was in full swing. So, there was a lot to talk about. Visit Lydia Lunch's official website at <http://www.lydialunch.org/> to keep up on her latest activities and to buy her merchandise. Also, check out the 2001 issue of BB Gun magazine for Lydia's interviews with Hubert Selby, Jr. and others.

Mike Ryan: *I was recently watching a documentary on Noam Chomsky where he comes up with the phrase "irrational attitudes to submission of authority." What do you think some of these irrational attitudes are in America today?*

Lydia Lunch: The problem with this country, which—if we were a little bit more globally conscious we could take a lesson from the rest of the world. I'll take France as an example. In all the strikes the truck drivers are continually posing now, for the average person this imposes a lot of impractical waste of time. But the government eventually has to take notice. I think that there's so many problems with the way this country is run that if more people called in strikes, maybe more could be done, and the politicians would have to pay attention.

We are so apathetic here that we're not irrational enough. I think not against authority. We're irrational as consumers because, we're so hoodwinked and hypnotized by credit cards, "Buy now pay later." Buy the latest technology and toys. Buy distractionary devices. It's no wonder the whole country is in debt and the amount of credit card debt in this country is outrageous, because people want everything they see on TV.

M: *Do you think a lot of that has to do with the way the information industry is run?*

L: Well, exactly. They've enslaved the entire United States community by bamboozling them into thinking they need all these distractionary time wastes so that people don't have enough time to think. They're either too busy shopping at the galleries or working overtime and being paid less to pay off their bills or rent. We don't even have to talk about people that have the luxury of having credit cards. We can talk about a third of the U.S. population that's in poverty, which we never hear about. I think the last thing we heard about poverty in this country were the lies under Reagan about who was on welfare at the time, which was a lie. It's mostly white people on welfare; mostly single women with two kids whose husband was abusive and left them. Now there's still, I think, 35% of this country lives in poverty. And if that's a statistic they're feeding us even covertly, then you know that it's probably greater than that. But yeah, there's an economic boom, I don't know who's booming. I'm not booming. Are you booming, Mike?

M: *No, not at all.*

L: Well, thank you. I don't know anyone who's having an economic boom right now.

M: *What sorts of information sources do you go to?*

L: Well, you named one great one at the beginning of this conversation: Noam Chomsky. Ralph Nader, Michael Moore, Jeremy Rifkin, Howard Lyman at madcowboy.com. You have to depend on people that have the time and the energy and the concern to know what the facts are and to investigate them. They are out there. Bookstores, libraries, and the Internet are filled with people that are posing the truth in one form or another, not that anything is bottom line or definitive, because I don't think that any statistic holds true. But it doesn't matter, because we still know the numbers they feed us are completely erroneous. You just have to keep your ear open and realize that everything that comes down the mainstream media, out of the mainstream media's mouth, is being ciphoned through probably 8 different sources that are basically wanting you to believe what they want you to believe so that they can keep more control over the individual and slant things the way they want them to appear.

M: *Are these some things you'll be taking on in your upcoming shows?*

Well, obviously now that we're in the predicament we're in with the presidential comedy skit that just happened...It's very interesting to me that Miami Dade has hired an independent count of the ballots, and I'm sure that it's going to show what we all know to be true, but it's going to be too late to fix anything come inauguration day.

My political speeches come in phases. I went from doing very interpersonal stuff to political stuff and more poetic and abstract. It really changes according to what I think needs to be documented at the time.

The Devil's Racetrack, which is the title of a spoken word CD I have just released--which has readings from *Paradoxia* and a variety of other things--it deals a lot more with the interpersonal. The book I'm writing now called *Johnny Behind the Deuce* deals with the interpersonal, too, but I'm sure that in the spoken word format in this coming year I'm going to have no choice but to take to a more political bandwagon.

I just did a few shows with Spitfire in the fall, the Spitfire Tour, and that was interesting because that definitely gives you a platform to get back on the political bandwagon, which I think is necessary. There are not enough people speaking out.

M: *You were just in Europe doing spoken word tours, do you speak about different things there than in the States?*

"They've enslaved the entire United States community by bamboozling them into thinking they need distractionary time wastes so that people don't have enough time to think."

L: Well, in Europe they certainly understand the political ramifications of what I'm talking about even if I'm telling very personal stories, better than they do here for some reason. They're still more involved in literature than they are with the Internet or video games. People still read more in Europe. They're better educated. They have a broader global consciousness, because they're so close to other countries and we're so isolated here. This is the problem with all of America. We think the rest of the world acts, thinks, and behaves exactly like we do, and they don't.

I was in Europe during the whole presidential fraud that was happening and America is just the laughing stock of the rest of the world. Even if it was filtered through CNN, I mean every country I went to they were just laughing at what a farce it is—not that there isn't political farces in most every other country. There certainly is, but we just became even more ridiculous than we already were considering what just happened.

M: *In the first track on the spoken word CD it sounds like you're taking the point of view of a prisoner. Is that right?*

L: Right, from the main track of *The Devil's Racetrack*.

M: *Was that inspired by Hubert Selby, Jr.'s *The Room*?*

L: Well, Genet also wrote about prison. Obviously, Hubert Selby's writing is very important to me. It's not really inspired by *The Room*. It's one part of a book that I'm writing that's based around a trilogy of monologues. One is the man that's in jail. One is the woman that set him up. And the third is from the dead man's perspective who was murdered in a crime that was committed for political reasons.

Basically what I wanted to get across—as opposed to either the Genet point of view of a prisoner or Selby's reading, a revenge fantasy point of view of prison—is someone who's actually happy to be in isolation for the simple fact that they can ruminate on the experiences they were able to have within their lifetime with this one woman. So, in a sense, they're almost left to their own dreams and they're happy being in that predicament.

M: *The topic of death comes up a lot in your writing, and I was wondering what you think the state of death repre-*

sents? *Do you believe in an afterlife or something like that?*

L: Well, one conclusion I came to—you know, Death: the black velvet box. What a relief. We all have to face it. But one idea I came up with in just trying to understand what past-life visions were—I believe in molecular memory. A molecular reincarnation. Almost the same way that DNA, you know, the decoding of DNA more complex than a computer; there's so many components of it. I've found that people that have had either future recall or past-life trans- or re-gressions might be just facing the knowledge that the body and the cells do contain—not specifically in a soul based realm, not that I don't think the soul doesn't exist—but in a more molecular memory type of way and that seemed to make a lot of sense to me. That if our DNA contains evidence that can date back thousands of years if not millions of years, then there must be some memory trapped within the code of that, too.

M: Have you investigated things like paganism, or is this just sort of your own conclusion?

L: Well, I've never even heard of "molecular memory" mentioned anywhere else. I'm sure somebody had to come to the same conclusion. As far as paganism, it's such a vague term. People need to believe in something greater than themselves, that is most people. Certainly the least dogmatic aspect of that is paganism. We should have respect for the planet. We should have more responsibility for our behavior. Those are the basic tenements that paganism deals with. I don't subscribe or abide by any religious or non-religious set of communal values. [laughs] I'm outside of every community.

M: I wanted to ask you about Hubert Selby's introduction to your book *Paradoxia*. He asks a question in response to your sort of disclaimer in the book that no names had been changed because everyone is guilty. He asks if everyone is equally guilty does that mean everyone is equally innocent? How do you respond to that?

L: No one's innocent. [laughs]

M: Well, considering what you just said, you were talking about how really the whole world is responsible for what's going on.

L: Well, exactly. And that doesn't mean that I feel any guilt. I've never felt a moment of guilt in my life, so I can't speak on that end either. I've never felt innocent and I've never felt guilty, but I certainly take some form of responsibility for my actions, or at least I don't blame anyone else for them unless I'm blaming the entire world, which collectively we are responsible for.

M: The other thing about *Paradoxia* is the title. It comes from *Psychopathia Sexualis*?

L: So it's claimed.

M: How did you come to choose the title?

L: It just popped into my little nugget one day.

M: Was that book somehow meaningful to you?

L: Oh, no. It's just one of those crappy old books that happen to be on my shelf. I have a lot of these reference books that you occasionally flip through and I really don't know where the origins—I mean, I'm sure it was in there somewhere. It was just a catchy title. The whole thing is a paradox anyway. It appears to be this, but is it?

M: Something else that comes up in *Paradoxia*...you say "Extreme physical pain elevates you to a zen-like state." I'm assuming you're familiar with *Fakir Musafar*?

L: Oh yes, of course.

M: Have you ever investigated anything like that, trying any of these rituals?

L: Well, I have my own rituals of pain threshold and the investigation into it. But I don't think we need to detail those right now, though.

But there is a divide between people, I find at least—and this is my own prejudice and elitism—there is a divide between people that have had forced surgery and recover from that and just elective surgery like a fakir. Because if you're electing to do it, you're already trying to transcend the state that the mind and body normally function in. If you're forced into surgery you have to learn how to overcome that on a new set of rules. **There's nothing as extreme as having an organ cut in half or having a bone or muscle reconfigured, having something removed. I don't think there's any amount of piercing or suspension devices that can reach that kind of intoxicating dilemma.** The overcoming of that puts you in a different sphere, especially if you've been exposed to repeated instances like that. Because it forces you to really—when you're in a state of such extreme physical pain that you have no control over, that you didn't choose to be in—it's just such a unique mindset that you have to deal with. Really, it obliterates any other kind of responsibility. I mean, there comes a point where you can do nothing but lie in pain and meditate and cogitate on just about everything. It really forces you to reevaluate a lot of things, and also, it forces you to respect when you're not in pain a lot more. You don't take the every day "wake up, feel fine" as much for granted.

M: What do you think about solitude? That seems to be another way to deal with everything that's going on.

L: I love it! There's no greater state of being. The problem

we have with the social training we have in this country from childhood is to find anything to distract away from solitude. I think that solitude is very important, because you have to reevaluate what's happening and what has happened and what you want to do next. If you're constantly distracted by things, constantly out in bars, at clubs, in bookstores, at cafes, in conversation with other people, it's just like the train keeps rolling on, but you don't have any time to really digest what's happening at each of those stations. And I think that's important.

M: What have you been reading lately?

L: I just got a bunch of books. I tend to read four or five books at a time. Sometimes I just don't read, because I think you have to clear your mind from that, too. I've been reading—which is unusual for me—this spate of kind of crime noir fiction: Edward Bunker, Chester Himes, Martin Amis, who just wrote a kind of cheesy noir book. So, I'll go between kind of cheesy reading, and then I'll go back to try to find things like whatever Jeremy Rifkin is working on. He's one of my favorite writers. One of the best books he wrote is called *The Biotech Century* a really fantastic book about what's going on. He wrote it twenty years ago and then updated it. He was laughed out of the scientific community about what's going on in bio-genetics and bio-technology, which I think we need to know about because we're eating it daily. Mike Davis, I really like *City of Quartz*. Although, I fear he's highly disputed because of some statistics he throws around. So, I'll go between kind of social science and then pulp if I need some inspiration on what's happening next.

M: Is your writing process sort of a lot of free writing at first and then you go back and edit?

L: I usually never go back on anything. I use like an ink and camera editing process. A lot of pacing, hair pulling, screaming—you know—coffee, cigarettes, and then when it's time to actually sit down and do it there's not much editing in my work. It just comes out the way it comes out. It's so much more of a conversational format. And I'm so used to writing for spoken word, you know, it pretty much just writes itself once I'm in the right state of mind to get there.

M: Do you ever dictate to tape?

L: No, I just write. The actual writing is the least time consuming part. The preparation, which could involve hundreds of miles of pacing around my house for days or weeks, [laughs] takes up far more time than the actual discipline of sitting down to do it. It's like a child that refuses to do anything it doesn't want to do until they're threatened with being permanently grounded.

M: Do you see a parallel between your writing and your photography?

L: Well I find photography to be a type of journalism because I'm documenting, especially since I do a lot of portraits or "urban decay." My photography is up now actually. I have a web gallery up on my website [<http://www.lydialunch.org>]. I find it a form of journalism because I'm documenting a certain moment in time when light hits a certain way on this person which will never be duplicated again. So, in a sense, it's very documentarian and that's what interests me about it. Also, it's immediate: there's the photo, you get it developed, it's in hand. It's certainly a different process than making a record.

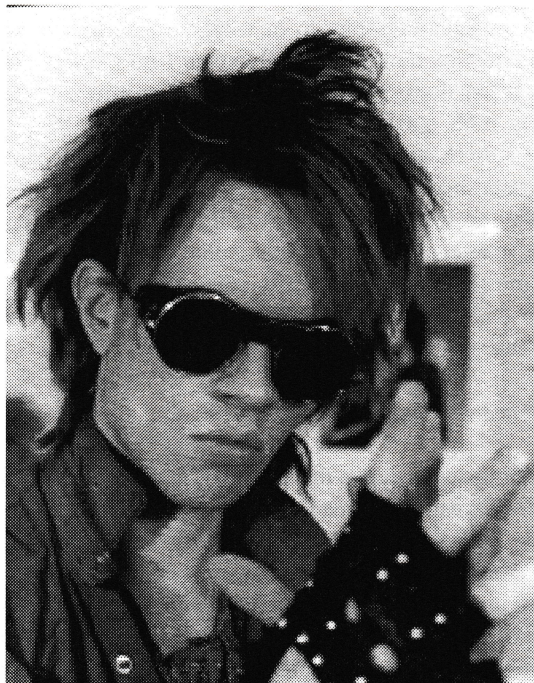
M: What are your upcoming plans?

L: I am doing some shows this Spring [2001] and I hope to get to the Midwest. I'll be reading from my new book *Johnny Behind the Deuce*, which I'm writing with Gene Gregorits. It's based really on his life, his true experiences as a night watchman in a sleazy downtown hotel and the denizens of that, kind of the crimes and misdemeanors they go through. I'm writing the female perspective of this book. It's the first time I've ever—it's very unusual to write a novel with somebody else. I mean, usually when people collaborate on books it'll be like "crime journals." It's a very unusual procedure, very fascinating to me. It's no different than collaborating with somebody on music. And since I tend to collaborate—I always like the third element that comes when two people work together. This is a very interesting new procedure for me, so I hope to be touring with some of it in spring and then releasing that in the fall as a book.

I'm working on a new record with Nels Cline who's done—with Geraldine Fibbers, Mike Watt—he's done over 70 CDs. He's almost like the John Zorn of the guitar. We have a project that's half finished called *Torcher*. That's kind of almost back to—it's an update of the *Queen of Siam* sound. I mean, it's very crime noir, very almost Henry Mancini-on-acid type music, very soundtracky. So we have half of that CD finished, and we're just going to continue working on that. **C**



Lydia Lunch, late 70's, from the New York No Wave Archive, <http://pages.ripco.net/~nailhead/teenage.html>



Nick Zedd

I stumbled upon Nick Zedd's book *Totem of the Depraved* like I do with many other cool and interesting things I find: through Henry Rollins' publishing company 2.13.61. Zedd's book came at a perfect time in my life where I felt down and had lost the lust for life. His story is amazing, interesting, inspiring and should remain documented in history, as should his underground films to preserve the untold stories of the underside/underground of America.

Nick Zedd instigated the Cinema of Transgression, an underground film movement in New York City that started in the early 1980's. (You can find the intriguing "Cinema of Transgression Manifesto" at www.nickzedd.com.) The films that I have seen of his are evidence that Hollywood puts out nothing but crap. Purchase or rent *Police State* or *Whoregasm* and you'll see what I mean. He blasts his audience with imagination and unflinching social commentary infused with a continual sense of struggle.

Unfortunately, Zedd's never ending task of cutting Gordian knots as a filmmaker and writer isn't surprising considering that artists on the edge in the USA get punished for not getting in line with typical satus-quo institutions such as school, career, church, and family. That's one of the things *Totem of the Depraved* illustrates well, and it makes me wonder why more artists don't. Thankfully, Zedd continues to agitate, comment, and question to this day through more underground films and incessant writing. Check back with <http://www.nickzedd.com/> often to keep up on his latest films (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *I of K9*), books that no one will publish (*No Guilt*, *From Entropy to Ecstasy*) and infrequent spoken word performances. Also, be sure to check out an excerpt from Zedd's *No Guilt* in the exquisite *BB Gun* magazine.

Drum Mountain

Untitled

I contest the propaganda of the ruling class
which denies the existence
of revolutionary consciousness.
Democracy is an illusion
when a gang of hucksters
representing the will of the privileged
condescend to electoral farce.
Result: No Change.
Dominant ideology is bankrupted
by its own redundancy.
Multi-nationals hire slave labor abroad
and sell out the working class.
The unemployed rebel.
Abolish the new world order.
Feed the poor.
Freedom now.
No more prisons.

Plutonium, neptunium, technetium
Drum Mountain
a dusty scrap heap of cylinders
Uranium waste dump
Giant mound of crushed drums
ionizing radiation producing malignancies
Supraliminal hypothesis: radiation no safe level
Low level radiation photons, alpha particle,
neutron enters the body, goes to the nucleus,
damages the cell
alters the nucleus
When a cell doesn't know
when to stop dividing or
how big to get, it multiplies
Cancer
Radiation-induced leukemia
Solid tumors
Brain tumors
Bone cancer
Thyroid carcinoma
Plutonium, neptunium, technetium
Drum Mountain
future city
radiation no safe level
A labyrinth of death
brought to you by
Union Carbide and Lockheed Martin

"John Ellis...decided to just announce that Bush had won when he hadn't even consulted the Voter News Service. Then CNN, NBC, CBS, all followed suit within five minutes, and there seemed to be no concern for the truth."

Mike Ryan: *What are you working on now?*

Nick Zedd: I'm acting in a film called *The Cult of Other People's Mirrors* and it's being shot in Chicago. I play a stalker, and it's directed by Christie Drew.

M: *How did you get hooked up with the people out in Chicago?*

N: I went to the Chicago Underground Film Festival and showed a movie there. I was approached by the people working on this film. They told me they were interested in having me be in it.

M: *Did you have any censorship problems in Chicago?*

N: No.

M: *So, your book *From Entropy to Ecstasy can be ordered through Penetration Films*, right?*

N: Right.

M: *So, it is published. You just published it yourself?*

N: I published it myself.

M: *Can you tell us what it's about?*

N: It's a historical novel set in Albania starting right after World War II about a psychotic police lieutenant in the Sigurimi who goes on a killing spree. It has two recurring themes: We remake our identities to accommodate forces beyond our control; and to change society you must first change yourself.

M: *How did you decide to set it in post-World War II Albania?*

N: I was really interested in this country and started reading about it around the time that Eastern Europe got rid of Communism—when the Wall came down. It seemed that Albania was the one country that resisted. It was the most tightly controlled zone on Earth. They had isolated themselves from any contact with even countries like the Soviet Union and China, who they broke off contact with because they didn't think they were purely Marxist-Leninist. It just seemed like one of the most exotic places on Earth since

there was not much information about it.

M: *Did you find any books that were particularly helpful in learning about Albania?*

N: I went to the library and researched it. I just looked up as much as I could about Enver Hoxha and the Albanian system for the last 40 years.

M: *What is the Lieutenant in the story a part of?*

N: The Sigurimi.

M: *What is that?*

N: That was the secret police, like the KGB.

M: *Do you have any future plans of dubbing your films onto Blockbuster videos like you've occasionally done in the past?*

N: Maybe, I don't know. I'll think about it—Well, actually, now I have released 3 tapes that music video distributors put out. One is a compilation called *Generation Z*, which is like a greatest hits tape of a lot of my short films. There's *War is Menstrual Envy* and *The Wild World of Lydia Lunch* on a separate tape. These are now being distributed around the country. You can probably find them at Tower Video. I'm also working on a DVD collection which should be coming out in the Spring of 2001, put out by Rubric Records.

M: *I read in another interview that you avoid watching movies and listening to music. Do you still do that?*

N: No, I listen to music—well, I don't listen to the radio and I don't have a television, but I have a monitor and sometimes I take movies out of the video store or I go see films. Until recently I haven't had that much money, but now I have more so I go see movies sometimes.

M: *Have you just been able to make more money off of your films?*

N: Yeah. Well, since I got a distribution deal on the music video distributors I've been making more money. And I got

"We remake our identities to accommodate forces beyond our control, and to change society you must first change yourself."

paid to act in this film.

M: I'm assuming at this point gentrification and rents are not improving in New York where you live. What made you decide to keep coming back?

N: Whenever I'd try living somewhere else—like when I went to Sweden in the early 90's, I tried to get working papers and was not given those. I couldn't get on welfare there. I didn't have much of a choice. The place I grew up, Maryland, is really boring. I didn't like that. When I came back to New York after being gone for three months I really appreciated the diversity here even though the rents are still really high. New York is always changing. It's always getting worse, I guess, unless you have a lot of money. A lot of people keep coming here from other places, too, so there's an influx of new ideas and new people, which still makes it exciting.

M: Are there still independent bookstores you can go to in New York? Do you get a lot of your information from websites?

N: Yeah, I just got a computer. The people that were employing me on this film in Chicago—one of the investors sent me a computer—which is great, because now I can get so much information from the Internet. But there's still some small bookstores around in New York. They come and go.

M: I noticed on your Internet journal you were talking about the 2000 U.S. Presidential Election. What's your take on that whole event?

N: I was really outraged that the networks prematurely announced the outcome of the elections before the votes were in, which I guess was because one of Bush's cousins worked at Fox News--John Ellis. He decided to just announce that Bush had won when he hadn't even consulted the Voter News Service. Then CNN, NBC, CBS, all followed suit within five minutes, and there seemed to be no concern for the truth. Now they are attempting to manufacture the consensus of the voting public to go along with their mistake in order to save face. Bush seems to be trying to steal the election. There seems to be a conspiracy in place to defraud the voters with massive voter fraud. I'm really disgusted by what has occurred. I went to a rally today in Times Square where people were protesting about this. I don't know if it'll get much attention in the media. I think it's important that people call the networks and complain about this and go out and protest and demonstrate to show the ruling class and the media that the people's will should be listened to. The people's will has to prevail, even though 50% of the people didn't bother to vote. I think the 50% that didn't vote didn't vote because they don't approve of the two candidates, the corporate oligarchy foisted upon us.

M: You were also commenting on the Electoral College. What's your opinion on that?

N: It's an obsolete institution. It should be abolished, because it's not a democracy. It's a Republic, you know?

M: How were you introduced to Antonin Artaud's work?

N: When I was in high school I got some books on surrealism and read about him.

M: What ideas of Artaud's were really striking to you?

N: Theater of Cruelty.

M: What's that about?

N: He was against any kind of control from the psychiatric establishment and was in favor of freeing the subconscious and confronting his audience—directly involving his audience in the experience of theater, separating the barrier that separates the audience from the performers in theater. I think that was also expanded upon by the Living Theater, Julian Beck, Judith Malina, and their group in the late 60's and early 70's. A lot of Artaud's ideas are not linear thinking. He's a really brilliant poet, but he was put in a mental institution and I think died there.

M: It seems like he was one of your biggest inspirations.

N: Yeah, he was one of them. He was interesting also, because he was physically so beautiful when he was younger and then his physical deterioration was so fast. It's strange. He went from being a young guy to looking really old, but he still was very charismatic.

M: Do you have any more plans for doing any spoken word gigs in the future?

N: Yeah, I'm gonna speak at St. Mark's Church on January 1st [2001] at the Poetry Project Marathon which I do every year. It depends. Whenever I get a gig I'll do it.

M: It sounds like something you actually enjoy doing?

N: Yeah, sometimes. But then I go through phases where I'm not into it.

M: Was there anything else you wanted to add?

N: A fool and his money are soon parted. **C**

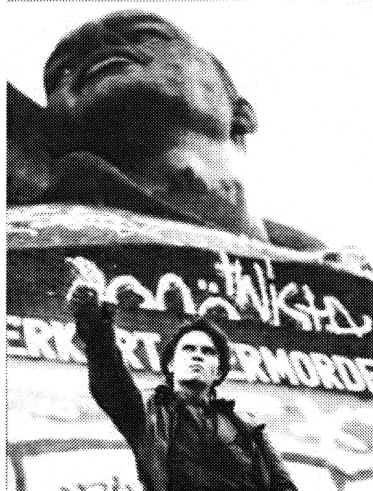


photo from <http://www.nickzedd.com/>



Douglas Rushkoff

Douglas Rushkoff writes books that basically cover technology and culture. Topics that he addresses include the Internet, youth culture (especially rave culture), hallucinogenics, fantasy role-playing, computer hackers, chaos mathematics, and "memes" (aka "media viruses"). His more recent books and articles help to decipher things like big business's effect on the Internet and the sinister agenda of coercive practices shared by the likes of Sprite, CIA, MTV, FBI, door-to-door salesmen, marketing agencies, and cult leaders. Read his books *Cyberia*, *Media Virus*, and *Coercion: Why We Listen to What "They" Say* to get yourself started.

Besides his books and syndicated columns Rushkoff teaches "virtual culture" classes at NYU, gives talks around the world, and is having one of his books made into a film. Go to his website (<http://www.rushkoff.com/>) and check out tons of articles by and about him, keep up on his latest work and appearances, and sign up for the "media-squatters" e-mail lists where you can get periodic updates from Rushkoff himself and participate in an unmoderated discussion group concerning the types of topics listed above.

Douglas Rushkoff: There's a book called *Coercion* which came out in paperback a few weeks ago in the U.S. and it's just coming out in its first editions in Europe. I finished it in '99, so it was basically a year 2000 book. And then I just finished writing a novel that won't be out here in the states til September of [2001].

Mike Ryan: *What's this novel about?*

D: In the U.S. its going to be called *Exit Strategy* and it's really about how an entire society can get obsessed with the "market reality," you know, how we can really become enslaved by our own desires and how those kinds of desires can be fueled and stimulated through some of the technology that we've developed. So, what I'm really looking at is how as marketers and sales people we're empowering our technology—our computers, our televisions, and such—to literally program us into caring more about how much money we have, how much possessions we have, how much land we have by stimulating some very base and simple kind of primal instincts. And when we're caught in that survival mode, we just want to accumulate more and more and more stuff.

Because what I was watching—you know, as the Internet boom happened in New York—I was watching people get wealthier and wealthier but actually not get happier as they were getting wealthier. They just got more and more obsessed with accumulating more and more. The more money they had the more obsessed they got with their personal security. Everything became everything they were. Everything they thought about was speculative in one way or another. It was

all a market reality. And I didn't think, and I still don't, that it bodes well for a society trying to deal with some pretty serious "group" problems, like the environment or getting along, problems in the so-called third world. It's like watching people with blinders on mindlessly pursuing goals that don't really yield them any long-term satisfaction.

So, I ended up writing this book called *Exit Strategy* which is about a young guy who was a former computer hacker who ends up really wanting to get into the game of venture capital; wanting to become as rich as everyone else seemed to be getting in this e-commerce market frenzy. He ends up becoming kind of the right-hand man of this big private venture capitalist guy, becoming sort of his advisor, his prophesizer, and slowly getting really enslaved by this mentality. Really the whole thing is based loosely on the story of Joseph in the Bible: a young guy who gets sold into slavery and ends up becoming the prime minister's right-hand man and ultimately welcomes his old posse, his whole family and his brothers, down into Egypt where they can get fed and survive the famine. But they wake up and they're all enslaved. So, what I'm looking at is how the building of these investment pyramids parallels the original pyramids back in Egypt and how both really tend to drag people down into a state of mental slavery.

M: *So, do you see any way for people to break out of that and be happy?*

D: Yeah, it's the same recipe as it was back in the Bible. It has to do with being an iconoclast. It has to do with really not worshipping at *anybody's* altar, and realizing that when

you do worship at someone or something's altar chances are you're being enslaved. You know, whether that's a king or a rock star or a movie star or money or a house in the Hampton's—as soon as you can put a name on something, it means it's not God. It means it's not really worthy of worship.

M: *Is that where technorealism comes in?*

D: Well, technorealism was a way for a group of people who knew that they were perceiving something that no one was talking about, to give voice to it. It was really a number of us in the late 1990's, like 1998, were starting to feel that everyone who was advocating technology, everyone who was looking at the Internet as a good thing, was also becoming very libertarian, very pro-market and pro-money. It became really hard to distinguish between the Internet as a communications technology and the Internet as an investment vehicle. What we wanted to do was say, look—we can be both thrilled with this technology and wary of those who would turn our society into little more than the Nasdaq stock exchange—that they don't mean the same thing. So, yeah, technorealism was, for me anyway, the first way of vocalizing this odd combination of excitement about the promise of new technology and a sort of dread at the way people's attention was so easily distracted into “How can I make money off this thing?”

M: *What is the best thing we can do with the Internet?*

D: I don't know if we can imagine, I mean, the *best* we could do—the best thing we could do with the Internet is the same thing we could do with any new technology that came around. And that would be strive for building an inclusive and life-like conduit for people to interact with one another. What the Internet does best is network lots of people together. What it resists, I think very naturally, is isolating people. What it resists is just selling things to people in a blind way. What the Internet does best is allow people to communicate with one another. So the best thing we can do with it is come up with new models of communication between people.

M: *Do you talk about some of these things at NYU? You're a professor there, right?*

D: Yeah, I'm a professor of, what do they call it—virtual culture—

M: *Yeah, what does that mean?*

D: Well it's the kind of culture we're talking about. On-line culture. Mediated culture. You know, it's not necessarily the culture of flesh and blood as much as the sort of consensual hallucination that we build together as a society to decide what is going on here. I always look at media as the tool

through which people come to consensus about what it is that's going on in the real world. And when a brand new media comes along like the Internet was in the 80's and 90's there's usually a big struggle to define what it is. What are the ground rules? How does this thing work? So, the courses that I teach at NYU are really designed to help people come to grips with how that battle goes on: what rhetoric is being used, what arguments are being used, who is trying to claim cyberspace and why. Whether it's business people, whether it's lefty-commies, whether it's artists, whether it's educators, whether it's government. It's a new turf. And there are a lot of different forces that are trying to define it and define the language we use to even speak about it. So, if people start thinking about the Internet and talking about the Internet as an investment opportunity, then that is very much what it will become. If people use language that has more to do with communicating between people then that's the kind of thing that'll be done there. And it's an interesting time, because it's not quite locked down yet.

M: *Was there a virtual culture studies program at NYU before you got there, or was that something you created?*

D: Well, I don't know that there's a virtual culture studies program there, just the couple of courses that I happen to

teach as part of the Interactive Telecommunications program. That's been there for about 20 years. It really started as a program that came up around the cable television movement. When cable TV started there was this thing called “public

access”. So for any cable provider to get a contract on a city they had to also provide real people with a way to broadcast their own shows. That was around the same time VHS cassettes came out and people could really record their own things with home video. This program was actually started by a woman named Red Burns, who was a documentary major from Canada, as a way of teaching people the ins-and-outs of this kind of amateur documentary filmmaking and how to get it on television and what all that was about.

But then as the Internet came about in the late 80's, the school didn't know where to put it. They're like, who should teach this? And because at the beginning the Internet was looked at as a public space—I mean, I don't know if most of your listeners know or remember, but it used to be against the law to sell anything on the Internet. It was against the law to have an advertisement. It was this thing that was really pretty limited to university use and researcher use. Those of us who were there then, we really thought of the Internet like public access, like a non-commercial kind of a media space. So, it seemed only natural I suppose to the people at NYU, that the Internet studies and the people who would be working on how to make things for the Internet would be in the public access television end of their program.

“The best thing we could do with the Internet...is strive for building an inclusive life-like conduit for people to interact with one another.”

M: *Could you roughly describe the path you took from being a kid who watched a lot of TV to teaching a virtual studies class at NYU? I believe you have a lot of background in theater and biology?*

It's tricky. A question like that kind of presupposes that there is such a thing as a linear narrative that my life is following. I could tell you some peaks and valleys. I was always interested in theater and I was always interested in medicine and biology. Pretty much what I've always been fascinated by is what makes something alive—What is it? Is it intention? Is it will? Is it agency? What keeps the human being alive? What keeps a story alive? What keeps drama happening? What is that voltage? And what forms does it take?—in the same way that ancient philosophers were always interested in both the causes of life and the causes of theater. They were always writing about the poetics and tragedy. What keeps this thing going? So, I was always looking at both, and I got a little bored with the medical/biological side because it got very mechanical in its application. But theater and the arts and writing seemed much more open ended and that they would provide, at least provide me as someone who wants to be entertained by what I do, provide me with more novelty, more unique situations, more permutations to play with. Whether I'm going to write a play or write a story, I'm experimenting with scenarios and seeing how they play themselves out.

I was doing all that, directing lots of theater, not making a hell of a lot of money doing it, and writing a lot of articles to keep myself alive in the meantime. Then a bunch of my weirdest, most psychedelic far-out friends from college ended up going into the high-tech industry, which made very little sense to me at the time. I thought only nerds would really go into computers. So, I started writing articles about what they were doing and finding that there was a very rich fledgling culture that was starting to emerge from this combination of San Francisco psychedelic culture and the Silicon Valley high-tech culture. And that this was maybe being chronicled more by *Mondo 2000* than it was by *Byte* magazine.

I ended up writing this book called *Cyberia* which was about everything from rave culture and new physics, chaos math and fantasy role-playing, and saying that there is a cultural movement afoot. There's something happening here. Then, lo and behold, the Internet happened, which wasn't exactly what I thought would happen, but it was *something*. And people said, "Oh this Rushkoff guy was there." So, then they

started calling me some kind of futurist or media theorist or cultural theorist. You know, if the shoe fits you might as well try it a while. So, I started writing books about television and youth culture, just the kinds of things that I was personally interested in at the time. And I was just lucky enough that the things I was interested in happened to be things that a lot of people got interested in a year or two after I did. By the time the book was coming out, it was like, "Oh, people are interested in the effects of video games on kids now," or people are interested in this idea of media viruses, people are interested in, more lately, coercion and how advertisers and marketers tend to program us into mindless consumption.

M: *At this point, what do you think is the state of cyberculture?*

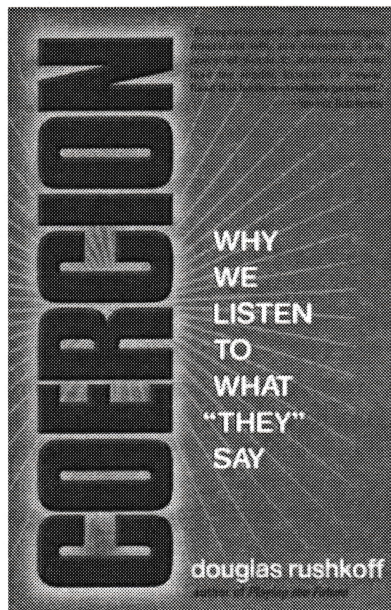
D: I think cyberculture is poised for a rebound. Cyberculture itself—I mean, what is culture? It's like the stuff that's in yogurt, right? Culture's a living thing. It's been in remission for awhile as the venture capitalists and e-commerce people kind of invaded and conquered cyberspace. It was hard to do anything else. It was hard to get attention for anything else. But now that most of those marketers are realizing it's going to be awfully hard to make money here and they're closing their shops—I don't know if the metaphor really holds, but there's a lot of real estate available now. There's a

lot of closed up shops that you can get into now for a fraction of their original cost, where you can open up a funky theater where there used to be a bad clothing store.

Now that most, at least most of America, tends to have the infrastructure to allow people to go online, now they're going to an online that's a little bit different than the one AOL or Microsoft Networks may have intended. They're going online and they're not as rapidly distracted from whatever their purpose might have been toward just making a blind purchase or getting on to E*trade and making an investment. The reason to go online now is no longer just to open up your online trading account. It's much more to send copies of the digital pictures of your niece to your grandma. Or to find other people who want to converse about ideas that they can't find anyone at the corner bar to talk about.

M: *From a media analyst's point of view, did the 2000 United States presidential election hold any interest for you?*

D: It didn't hold a hell of a lot. [laughs] It was pretty sad in a lot of ways. I think what happened in the most recent election was really a battle of branding. Gore's tragic mistake was that I think he got overwhelmed by his own branding. We live in a culture now where people deconstruct media.



They watch the way people brand themselves and certainly the way stores and companies brand themselves. So when they watch an election like this one unfold, they're watching the media machinations of the characters, of the politicians, as much as they are listening to the actual policies of these people. And certainly, the way CNN or CBS deconstructs the debates or a podium speech has much much more to do with "How did they do?" rather than "What did they say?"

The problem for Gore in this election was that very early on he hired a brilliant woman, Naomi Wolfe, a feminist, to help him revamp his image, and the story that got spread and the sentiment that really spread was that Gore is creating an image for us; that Gore now is going to assemble a brand. And I don't think he ever recovered from that. All the stories about Gore from that moment on were about him fabricating stories, him lying about ideas in order to create a certain image of himself. He became more and more plastic as his branding overwhelmed whatever his intent was. But it was really interesting after he lost, everybody said, oh wow, that last speech he made he seemed genuine all of a sudden. That's because he really allowed the brand to go away. He was no longer entrapped by it so much.

On the contrary, Bush ran a good campaign in that he understands that Americans are very sick and tired of branding. The brand he came up with for himself was like the un-brand brand. He was sort of like the Sprite of candidates where they say "image is nothing, thirst is everything." So here was a guy who through his very ineptitude demonstrated that he was not branded. Of course, I believe his ineptitude was crafted. I don't think he's as stupid as he pretends to be. I don't think he's as much of a bumbling idiot. I think he crafted

that persona in order to appeal to an America that was sick and tired of over-slick, very hyped, and branded personalities.

M: Can you imagine a media virus that could have gotten a third-party candidate like Ralph Nader elected?

D: It'd be very tricky. Media viruses work in very particular ways. It's interesting, most of the people doing this thing they're calling "viral marketing," which is based on media viruses, don't really understand how they work. You know, media viruses are almost always temporary. They almost always only work for things that are somewhat counter-cultural, things that go somewhat against the grain. It would be very hard for a candidate to use a media virus to do anything other than get some initial attention. It's much harder to get the entire nation or a majority of the nation supporting some kind of a viral concept. It works for making a brand look "naughty," or selling some Madonna records, if she can create secondary media about something. But it has much more to do with scandal than consensus. So, no.

I can see—and I think he probably did—someone like Nader using a media virus to get *attention*. So everyone knows who he is, so that no one can quite spit him out. But, it would be very hard to win an election based on a virus alone. You can get people out into the streets. You can get people upset about something short term, but it's very hard—it would be like a candidate getting elected based on the Elian Gonzalez story. I mean, maybe a mayor could get elected if something like that happens the last week before an election. You know, because there's this sudden outrage. But it's very hard to do a protracted campaign based on a simple media virus. **C**

Penelope Houston

The RE/Search reprints of the magazine "Search & Destroy" that documented the late 70's San Francisco punk scene is the reason I know who Penelope Houston is. For those who do not know, she was the singer for the band the Avengers. I was able to find an Avengers CD in Minneapolis at a place called Oarfolkjokeopus (now Treehouse Records). Listening to that CD was one more piece of evidence that shows how heartless 99% of the music coming out today is.

Since the Avengers, Penelope has gone on to create solo music projects and start a website/webstore/record label called Penelope.net (<http://www.penelope.net/>) that features CDs by her, Avengers, and many other bands that she simply likes (e.g., Bikini Kill, the Donnas, Bratmobile). Penelope's upcoming album is titled "Loners, Stoners and Prison Brides."

I interviewed Penelope right after the presidential election when the winner was still unknown and just after she had returned from the first annual Rockrgrl Conference in Seattle.

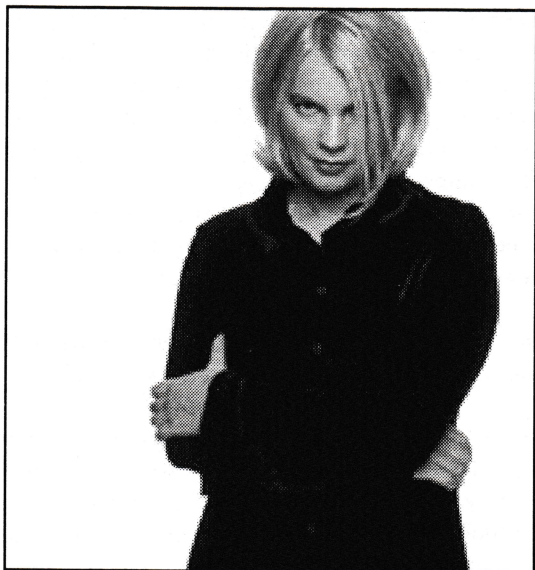


photo: <http://www.RepriseRec.com/penelopehouston/biography.html>

Mike Ryan: *Would you like to start by telling us about the Seattle Rockgrl event you were just at?*

Penelope Houston: Yeah. Well, it was the first annual Rockgrl conference put on by *Rockgrl* magazine. I'm not sure exactly how many people were there, but there were a lot of rocker girls and it was a lot of fun. I was invited to be on a couple of panels, but I only made it to one of them, about Internet marketing, which was interesting. There were lots and lots of bands playing, and I had a really good time. I saw a really great band called Handsome 3some, and I believe they're playing Chicago tonight. I'm not sure. They're from Holland. They were really mind blowing. [Penelope has their CDs for sale on her site.] And I saw Courtney Love speak. She did an almost 2 hour Q & A. It was sort of interesting. It was an all around fun affair.

M: *Did Courtney Love say anything that was particularly interesting to you?*

P: Well, since I heard her—I didn't actually hear the whole thing—but since then I read this speech that she gave a few months ago that was also interesting. Her take on the music industry is—I mean, she's intelligent and everything—but it's kind of like 20/20 hindsight about major labels. So she's able to warn people about what it's like to be a pretty big star on a major label and the pitfalls. I kind of felt like she wasn't really able to give the people that were at the Rocker Girl music conference advice that they could use. I mean, all of the advice she gave wasn't really particularly useable for those people, because obviously there's going to be a lot more independent artists and people who are putting out their own stuff or putting it out on smaller labels than there are artists who get to the point that Courtney Love has been at.

M: *How did you end up getting asked to give your talk about Internet marketing?*

P: I know the publisher of *Rockgrl* magazine. In fact, I was on the cover of their third issue. When she asked me to do a performance as part of the showcase she also asked me to do the panel.

M: *So, you have your own label that you're selling your music on, is that right?*

P: Well, I have a label and a website and a webstore called Penelope.net. That's the name for all of it, basically. On the web store, I'm carrying a lot of different independent women and girl bands that I like, basically. That's the bottom line, I have to like their music. I'm carrying a lot of CDs by a lot of different artists besides my own. Then I have all the Avengers stuff and all the Penelope Houston stuff that's available. I also put a couple titles out on my own label, Penelope.net Records, the first one being a collection of rarities that came out about 6 months ago called *Once in a Blue Moon*. That was pretty easy because I just collected some demos and

some things that had come out in Europe that had never come out in America and put them together. My next project, which will be recording a whole new record with new songs, is going to take a little bit more thought. It was easy to put out that collection.

M: *So, that's what you're working on now?*

P: Yeah that's what I'm working on now. I'm writing songs and thinking about how to go about recording. I don't have a band right now that I'd like to play with so I need to get some people together for that and then I have to figure out how to pay for it.

M: *I'm assuming that you do other writing besides just the lyrics in your songs?*

P: I don't actually do that much writing aside from lyrics. I'm a journalist in the old sense of the word. I keep journals, but I've never really considered publishing poetry or anything like that. I used to write more poetry actually when I was younger, but I haven't really made any kind of collection or anything. I think if I was gonna publish something it would probably be my lyrics.

M: *Would you want to read any of your lyrics for the radio show?*

P: No! [laughs] I always hope that people have heard the song before they sit down and read the lyrics, because without the melody, sometimes it's not really fair to the writing, because the writing was meant to be part of a song, and not really meant to stand on its own as a poem.

M: *So, with your lyrics, you usually come up with a melody first and then you decide to write something to that?*

P: Not exactly. I usually write the lyrics first, but for me there's always a natural rhythm that I can see in my lyrics that I wouldn't—I would never like read a line and go, "Oh, I could do it this way or that way." For me it's always just one particular way that it runs through my mind. From there I'll work on the melody and eventually the chords usually work that way.

Sometimes I take my lyrics and work with a co-writer who will come up with the melody and chords. But a lot of the times I'm writing the melody myself, and I'll get someone else to write the chords or I'll write the chords, too. So, they are pretty attached, but they don't necessarily come out of my brain with the melody attached. Definitely a rhythm.

M: *Currently you're living on the East Bay?*

P: In Oakland.

M: *I know San Francisco artists are facing things like evic-*

tion on a large scale right now. Are artists in Oakland faced with the same problem?

P: I think there's a lot more space in Oakland. I haven't really heard of any rehearsal spaces closing down. I'm kind of lucky though, because for the most part, the last 7 or 8 years, I've been doing acoustic stuff. So, I've been able to rehearse in people's houses or various places without having to rent rehearsal spaces. I always hate renting rehearsal spaces. They always seem like hellacious places to me.

I think that the problem in San Francisco is that real estate has gotten so expensive that a lot of artists including visual artists are not really going to be able to afford to live there anymore. And I think a lot of them will end up coming over to Oakland. There's really extensive warehouses and a lot of space over here. I don't really see it as that big of a problem. I guess it's kind of the same thing that happened to New York a while ago. It's just the fact that San Francisco is just getting more and more expensive. It's gonna effect all kinds of artists not just musicians.

M: Before you were living in Oakland, you were living in London, is that right?

P: I lived in London in 82-83 and then I moved back to the Bay Area. I've been living in San Francisco and Oakland [since].

M: I read that you had gone to LA after living in San Francisco, then to London, and then you moved back to the Bay Area. Was there any logical path you were following or were you just wandering around, checking out different cities?

P: Well, actually, when I was living in London I did a little bit of recording with Howard Devoto from Magazine. I wasn't really planning on moving back to the States. I came back and was planning on traveling across the country and when I got to San Francisco I ran into the guitar player from the Avengers, Greg Ingram. He gave me a tape of some songs he was working on. Then I decided I would stay there for a few months and try to do some recording and make some music. I think that one of the reasons I did that was because people in the Bay Area and San Francisco thought of me as a musician and singer. So it was easier for me to get people to work on projects. Whereas in London it was a little bit more difficult, because nobody there really knew too much about who I was. I mean, some people had heard of the Avengers but it was a little bit more difficult.

Once I started working with people in San Francisco, it ended up that I just stayed here. And that's basically where my whole acoustic career came from, from like '84. That was my first show here. And just building on that, that's basically how I ended up staying here.

M: Do you feel that living in the other cities like Los Angeles and London had some sort of affect on you artistically and creatively?

P: Well, I noticed that in Los Angeles there's a lot—you know, that's the home of most of the major labels. You kind of have the specter of the A&R guy showing up at your gig. You kind of have this whole major label shadow over all of your performances and even your writing.

And in London when I was there, which was the early to mid-80's, people were really into being on top of the pops, and they really wanted to be huge. There didn't seem to be that many people interested in making independent underground music. The post-punk new-wave thing was happening there when I was living there. Simple Minds...um...all these different bands. I don't know. It was hard to find people a little bit more serious about—who's main goal wasn't to get on top of the pops.

Then coming back to San Francisco I found that it was easier to connect with a musical underground and find people that were a little bit more open-minded about what kind of music they could make. So, yeah, I think they effected me, but maybe in a negative way. [laughs]

M: Or did it just make you want to be an independent artist that much more?

P: I don't know. I've never really felt the need to try to work within a framework of making something that sounded more sellable. When I was on Reprise and Warner Bros., which I was on for two years—or actually two albums, five years—they would say stuff to me like "Why don't you write a single?" "Why don't you listen to some songs on the radio and write something that sounds like that?" And I just shrugged my shoulders and said, "You know, that's not what I'm interested in doing. That's not what motivates me to write." And I have to clear up: it was the people in the U.S. that said that. The people in Germany, the label I was signed to there, never said anything like that.

M: Is there anything besides just a lot of hard work that has allowed you to make an independent career out of what you do?

P: Persistence is definitely there. Hopefully, some talent. [laughs] I think that anybody that decides they want a career as a musician hopefully is going to look at it for the long haul. You have to have some business savvy and you have to be able to figure what people are offering you and what they're not offering you. Different people go at it different ways. I've certainly been told I could have been more ambitious or pushier, something like that. But, that's not me. I think I've pretty much remained true to myself and I've held on to the majority of my credibility throughout my career. There's never going to be a point where I have something I

have to hide away, like some record that I have to have pulled from all the stores.

M: *Are you still politically motivated like it seemed most people in the San Francisco music scene were in the late 1970's?*

P: Well, aside from supporting—consciously trying to support women, independent women musicians and song writers and performers, I basically try to live a real, liberal lifestyle. I try to tread softly on the planet and try to be environmentally aware. And I occasionally move to join protests or demonstrations, but not that often. I wouldn't say, oh yeah I'm a really big political activist. I think that my attitude towards life, which is also expressed in my lyrics, is definitely one of a humanistic point of view. I just hope that carries itself across in my songs.

But now after last night [U.S. presidential election 2000], not knowing who the next president is going to be, it's kind of a gigantic nightmare. **If it ends up being Bush of course, I'm going to be really disappointed. But I also feel like this perhaps, this close of an election, is going to make people feel a little bit more responsible and politically active.** And it's kind of had that affect on me.

M: *What differences or similarities do you see in your arts community today compared to the late 70s and early 80s?*

P: In the late 70's when I was in the Avengers, I think there was really a great sense of freedom and innocence to what we were doing. **We knew we were trying to break down kind of the arena rock, the dinosaur rock, that had come before, but we didn't really know what the outcome of that would be. I feel like now people are pretty jaded. The whole concept of "alternative" has been turned into something you can go to the mall and purchase. I kind of felt like we were more inventive at that time.** As a young generation we were kind of inventing our own thing, whereas now I feel like people can just go and buy a look or buy a sound. There's not really that much creativity coming from the younger generations. So in a way it's sort of more disappointing. **And when anything new does happen it seems like it gets scooped up by the marketing executives of the world and just turned into the next big thing within a number of weeks after it comes out.**

I don't know. I don't really follow pop culture that closely at this point. I feel like I'm the kind of person that can work on my own creative endeavors without having to expose myself to what the newest thing is or the latest thing is.

M: *Were you always the kind of person who worked on her own?*

P: Well, when I was in the Avengers we wrote songs as a band. We wrote songs at rehearsal. It wasn't quite as calcu-

lated as my songwriting now. I usually write by myself or with one other person, but we were definitely influenced by the whole punk movement and by other punk bands. I was definitely more tied in with that movement than I am with any other movement now.

M: *So, in Oakland there really isn't any kind of movement going on right now?*

P: Well, in San Francisco there are people—what people refer to as local bands and such. But I don't think there's a particular sound that would define the whole group of musicians. It's just a whole lot bigger now. It's just—you know, back in 1977-1979 when the Avengers were together there was usually only one or two places to play in any big city. In small towns there was usually none or some rented hall or something. And now if you go to any big city, Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, New York, LA, you're gonna just see tons and tons and tons of bands playing at tons and tons of clubs and all different kinds of music. That just didn't exist at that time. It was just a much smaller scene. College rock didn't exist. Indie-music didn't exist. Alternative didn't exist. None of that was around. It was much more of an empty playing field. Now there's just billions of bands and billions of clubs. So, in a way there's more going on musically in any given city, but as far as it being some kind of a community where people are influencing each other in different ways, I don't think that's happening so much anymore.

M: *Are you working with any other art mediums right now besides your music?*

P: No. I guess I wouldn't really consider my website very much an art medium. [laughs] Some people would, but I don't think I'm really at that point where I can say, ah yes I'm a web designer. But no, I haven't really been. I used to paint and—if you can find a copy of *Once in a Blue Moon*, my latest release, you'll see about twenty different photographs that I took while I was on tour that are in there. But I haven't really been concentrating on any other mediums besides music.

M: *Sounds like you've got to be busy enough doing your own work and running Penelope.net. I would think that would take up most of your time right there.*

P: Yeah, it does... Those are basically the two things I'm concentrating on.

M: *Are there any other artists musically or otherwise who you find inspirational at this point?*

I liked the last Sparklehorse record. [laughs] There's this band that I ran into from Holland called Handsome 3some. They were pretty remarkable and inspiring.

If a person was to go to my site and look through the various

artists I have on there, quite a few of them I am enamored with musically. I've never been a really big fan. I've never really been a very big *music* fan. I don't really spend a lot of time listening to other people's music, because I find that I need to have sort of an empty space in my head for my stuff to form in. You know when people say, "we want you to write a top-ten," I always need to search all over and figure out what that's going to be. [laughs]

M: Are there any writers that come to mind?

P: Oh, there's a lot of writers that I really like. Lately I've been reading Alice Monroe a Canadian writer. Toni Morrison I love. Barbara Kingsolver. I like Amy Tan. A lot of women writers are the people I like to read.

M: Is there anything else you'd like to add? Any parting advice you have for artists and writers?

P: Well, I always say the same thing when people ask for advice to songwriters and musicians, and that's basically hang onto your publishing and if at all possible try to get record deals where you own your tapes, which is usually not the



Penelope: late 1970's

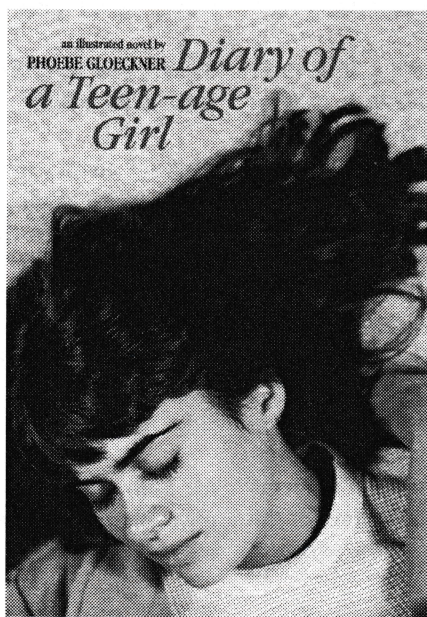
major label formula. They always make you pay for it and then they own it, which is really the downside to at least American major label contracts. I was lucky because I had a European major label contract where they paid for it and they owned it, but at least I didn't have to owe them for my whole recording budget, which is usually the case with everybody in America. I think it's really great when you can own your own tapes and then lease them to people and then eventually get them back. Lease them to other people, I think that's a really big plus. And that's my biggest piece of advice to publishing: **retain ownership. C**

photo: <http://www.RepriseRec.com/penelopehouston/biography.html>

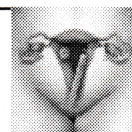
Phoebe Gloeckner is a comic book artist. Some of her influences are Balthus, Kurt Schwitters, and her father. She is also a trained medical illustrator, which basically means that she studied pre-med and learned how to draw the types of illustrations you see in medical textbooks.

Gloeckner had the chance to work this skill into a more creative outlet when she illustrated J.G. Ballard's book *The Atrocity Exhibition* (published by RE/Search), which was one of the first places where I saw her work. There's an eerie beauty there (see photo opposite page) that challenges the viewer to reaccess the human body and sexuality just as Ballard's writing does.

Phoebe's best known work is probably her book of collected drawings called *A Child's Life*, which is an illustrated autobiography of her childhood that tells of her experiences dealing with a sexually abusive step-father and being a homeless



Phoebe Gloeckner



teenager on the streets of San Francisco. As in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, *A Child's Life* also presents a work of eerie beauty where her similarity to Balthus' work becomes obvious.

Unfortunately, she's encountered problems with this book where printers wouldn't allow it to be published or governments wouldn't allow it into their countries. But regardless of controversy, she is a great artist who's work should be looked at and shown. To not have her work

available to the public would be to deprive us of a wonderful imagination matched with great talent. I think that's something we're in short supply of.

That said, don't forget to support her work! Go to her website (ravenblonde.com) to find her drawings and the release date of her latest book, *Diary of a Teenage Girl* (above).

"I wanted to preserve the voice of that teenager, which I find myself oddly able to disassociate from and look at as a character rather than as myself."

Mike Ryan: *What have you been working on lately?*

Phoebe Gloeckner: I've been working on a novel that incorporates a diary I wrote when I was a teenager. And it's also illustrated. So, it's not a comic book. It's not a graphic novel. It's an illustrated novel.

M: *Was there any particular reason you wanted to illustrate your novel as opposed to only using words?*

P: Because of the way I think, I naturally have a lot of pictures in my head, and it seemed natural to include pictures. As I was writing it, it just seemed to *beg out* for pictures. I've always written a lot, but I've always drawn a lot as well. For me the two fit together well.

M: *Do you feel that visual arts you see influence your writing, and that writing you read influences the visual art that you produce?*

P: That's an interesting question. Sure it does. I think that some writing is very visual, very descriptive in a certain way. And you tend to make pictures in your head as you're reading things. So, if I think of books that I've liked, pictures I've made in my head kind of go along with it. And that probably does influence my own work.

M: *How does your creative process work? Do you sort of start with one image and work around that?*

P: The last book I did was a compilation of a lot of old and new work. It was called "A Child's Life". Often times—people have asked me about this before, do you sketch out a story before you start inking it? Is it all planned? Generally it's not. I often start with a large image on the first page. I'll just sit with it for awhile, and then ink it and maybe even add words, and then let the story go on page by page. I won't even know how the story is going to end.

That's harder with longer pieces, and it's harder with a novel. But nevertheless, I never like the feeling of knowing how things are going to go. I like to leave a lot of things unknown, even for myself, until the very end.

M: *So, the book you're working on now, you said that's*

diary entries from when you were a teenager?

P: Yeah, it incorporates that. I used to write—well, I still do—I always kept a diary. Very detailed, especially when I was a teenager. I mean, I carried it around everywhere just writing everything. I wanted to make a novel about that time in my life. I wanted to preserve the voice of that teenager, which I find myself oddly able to disassociate from and look at as a character rather than as myself. And so I'm incorporating the actual words from the diary into this novel.

M: *You were a teenager in the late 70's right?*

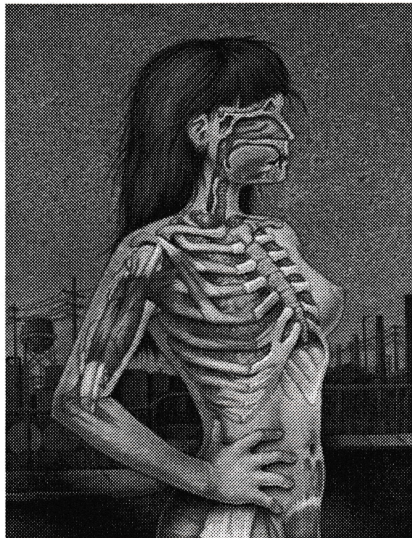
P: Right.

M: *What do you think the cultural differences are now between the late 70's and today?*

P: It was an era—it was strange. I was very, very young—I wasn't even a teenager yet—when abortion became legal.

There was all this bra burning and women's lib. I was somewhat conscious of it when I was a child, and I think I went into adolescence assuming that women were equal to men in every way. There were endless possibilities. That there's no such thing as "sexism" just because I had, you know, kind of heard in the news that things had changed. But I had no real experience with that. Then as I got older I was constantly surprised to find that things weren't equal. And I think I had a very difficult adolescence trying to define myself as a girl and a woman. I don't know if young women and girls have that same confusion now. I'm sure they do to a certain extent, but that was a time of real dynamic change and lots of idealism. Idealism that wasn't carried through—I mean, it didn't sink down into people's behavior so much.

I think back then in the 70's, particularly in San Francisco where I grew up, it was a very free era sexually and in terms of relationships. People were experimenting with different types of relationships like open marriage, and there were lots of communes popping up all over the place. There was no real presumption—I didn't grow up thinking "I'll get married and have kids." It was just sort of undefined, what you would do. There was no role model, because it was all experimentation at that time, I think.



M: Did you find that there was a stronger sense of community then in general, or even just amongst artists? I'm assuming that you hung out with other artists?

P: No, not as a teenager. I didn't know any artists. I felt alienated from everyone. I think a lot of teenagers do, but you mean later on?

M: Yeah, once you were more established as a comic book artist.

P: No, I think it's pretty much the same now as it was then.

M: Considering that your recent work has focused on main characters who are children, do you think you will continue creating works that keep the same focus?

P: I'm really not sure. I have little kids right now. They're always very much in my consciousness, and I tend to think, in some ways, in terms of what would interest them. I've got one foot in that world, but the other foot in everything I do as an adult. I imagine there could be more of that, you know, quality to it. To tell you the truth, after this book, the teenage diary, I would really like to do something entirely different. That might involve a different medium in fact. I've done film before, and I think I might want to explore film a little more and still images, not in terms of a narrative or painting.

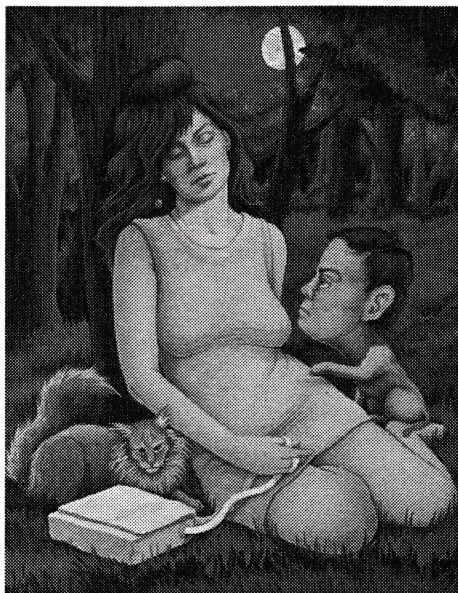
M: Have you had some problems with censorship?

P: Oh yeah, a lot.

M: How have you responded to that?

P: Well, it's not that I've been censored. For example, that book *A Child's Life*. They didn't let it into France, which was odd because R. Crumb was the guest of honor at the Angouleme Comic Festival, which is huge (and that's in France). He was actually talking about my work, and he wanted to get the book there. It was stopped at customs and never got in. People wrote to me saying that they were taking in personal copies and giving them to bookstores to sell. That's the only way they got into France. Then in England, it was stopped at the border along with some of R. Crumb's books, actually. And

there was a legal case and they decided to let it in. They basically said that my work was child pornography. The funny thing is, if the book had been totally written with no pictures, I don't think anyone would have blinked an eye. But people look at pictures and they don't bother to look at the context, and they misinterpret what the author is trying to say. At least that's what happened to me.



M: I'm surprised that happened in France of all places. It seems like, historically, that's where everything that is banned everywhere else is allowed. Have you run into similar problems in the United States?

P: Yeah, again this last book *A Child's Life*. The first two printers that the book was brought to refused to print it. Then at the second printer, my publisher told them, "If you don't publish this book we're going to withdraw all our other titles." And there were a lot of other titles. So, the printing company decided to print the book. But what they did is they got a special crew and they printed it at night,

because they didn't want the pages out where other people could see them and might get upset about it. It was basically printed in secret.

M: Do you foresee any printing problems with *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*?

P: I don't know. It's unpredictable. Sometimes there hasn't been any problems and sometimes there's been problems. I don't really know what will happen.

M: It's just kind of surprising to hear about things like this happening in America, when you wouldn't think it would. But it seems to happen a lot.

P: I guess, a picture is worth a thousand words and often times

they're open for interpretation. They make people nervous still.

M: From reading other interviews you've given, I saw that you hang out with writers a lot. Who are some of these writers that we should know about?

P: Kevin Killian is one of them. He's a San Francisco writer. (I just moved from the San Francisco bay area to Long Is-

"I think I went into adolescence assuming that women were equal to men in every way...that there's no such thing as 'sexism' just because I had, you know, kind of heard in the news that things had changed...Then as I got older I was constantly surprised to find that things weren't equal."

land, New York.) Kevin is married to another author, Jody Bellamy. Anyway, Kevin writes plays. He puts on three or four a year, and for the last five or six years I've been in his plays. None of his actors are professional actors. They're either writers or artists. He's got quite a big group of artists and writers that he works with, and a lot of them are my friends. Actually, Andrea Juno, who worked on RE/Search, was also in his plays at one time before she moved to New York.

M: Was there any particular reason you moved to Long Island?

P: Yeah, my husband is a professor and he's teaching at Stony Brook.

M: Is there an interesting story about how you ended up meeting a professor and marrying him?

P: Well, it's interesting to me, I don't know if it is to anybody else. [laughs] I have a background in science basically. I studied pre-med and bio-medical communications and did medical illustrations for a long time, and my husband reads a lot and loves the arts. So I think we just kind of complimented each other.

M: Did you meet in a lab somewhere or a reading?

P: No, we actually met—do you remember Operation Desert Storm?

M: Yep.

P: There was a huge rally against it in the early 90's in San Francisco, like millions of people were there. I actually met him there. Then a couple years later I met him again at a friend's house, and that was a total coincidence.

M: Are you still doing medical illustration?

P: Yeah, I do.

M: Do you enjoy that enough so that you'd like to keep doing it for a living?

P: Well, I like it a lot, and I like it most when I can draw whatever I want to draw, but that's not often. I illustrated *The Atrocity Exhibition*, and when I did that Vale said, "Draw whatever you want and make it medical." That's not the type of job that comes along too often, because you have to draw things very accurately. Since I'm an artist, I like to use my imagination. Typically, medical illustration doesn't involve using a whole lot of imagination. Although, so many of the subjects—you have to really make conceptual drawings; show how things work, not exactly how they look, but how they work. That's interesting. I enjoy that.

M: How did you come in contact with Vale to do *The Atrocity Exhibition*?

P: I had done a comic in, I think it was *Young Lust*. And Vale, the publisher of RE/Search, called me up and said he really liked my drawing style because it reminded him of Victorian children's books. He asked me to do a comic for RE/Search magazine when it was a tabloid publication.

M: Are there any visual artists that still inspire you today?

P: Well, I love Balthus, he's one of my favorite painters. I don't really keep abreast of everything new that's going on. I look at things as they come to me. Alice Neal, she's a portrait painter. Kurt Schwitters is a collage artist, who I think has influenced me very much in ways that aren't obvious in my work, but they're obvious to me. I'll look at anything. I like a lot of things.

M: What are some of your sources for information, whether it's art, news, etc.?

P: I look on the Internet a lot. Often times on another writer or artist's homepage, they'll have links to things, and I'll find stuff that I'm interested in. Sometimes people will send me their work. There's a young author named Brian Pera, who wrote a book recently called *Troublemaker*, and he sent me his book this summer[2000] when it came out, because he said he liked my comics. I read the book and I think it's fantastic. So, I was introduced to his work just because he sent it to me.

M: Is there still an underground comic scene going on?

P: Well, yeah there is. There's lots and lots of interesting young cartoonists who make their own books—you know, xerox them. There's the Xerox Foundation, which gives grants of, I think, \$5000 to a lot of artists that were previously just self-published. I mean, when I go to a comic convention, I get bombarded with young people giving me stuff. A lot of it is really interesting. So, there are a lot of people you've probably never heard of who are doing good work, who might in the next few years be more famous.

M: Are there good independent bookstores in Long Island?

P: You know, I haven't found one yet. And that's kind of depressing to me. I have to drive about an hour to get to a good art supply store. I'm still exploring it.

C

